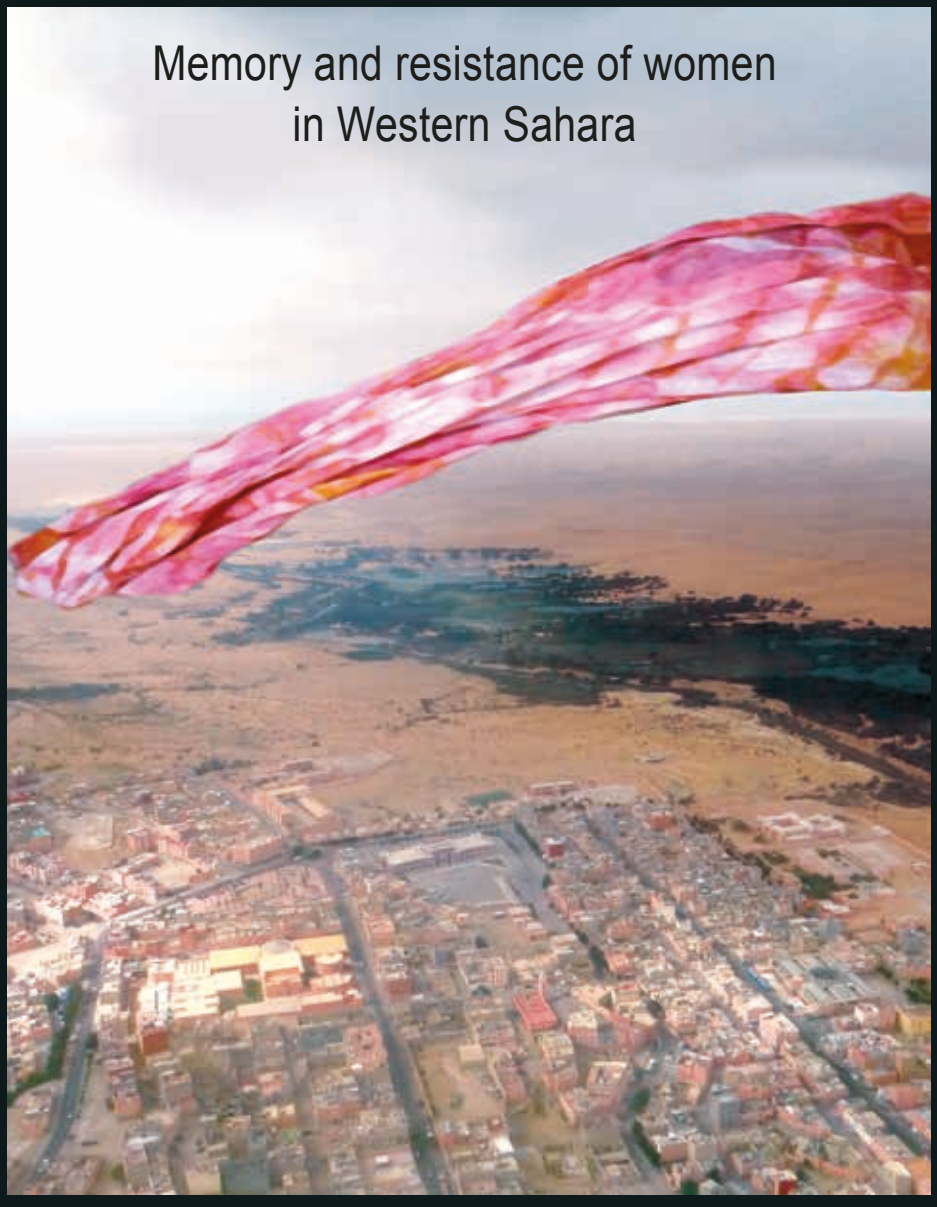
In occupied land

Memory and resistance of women in Western Sahara



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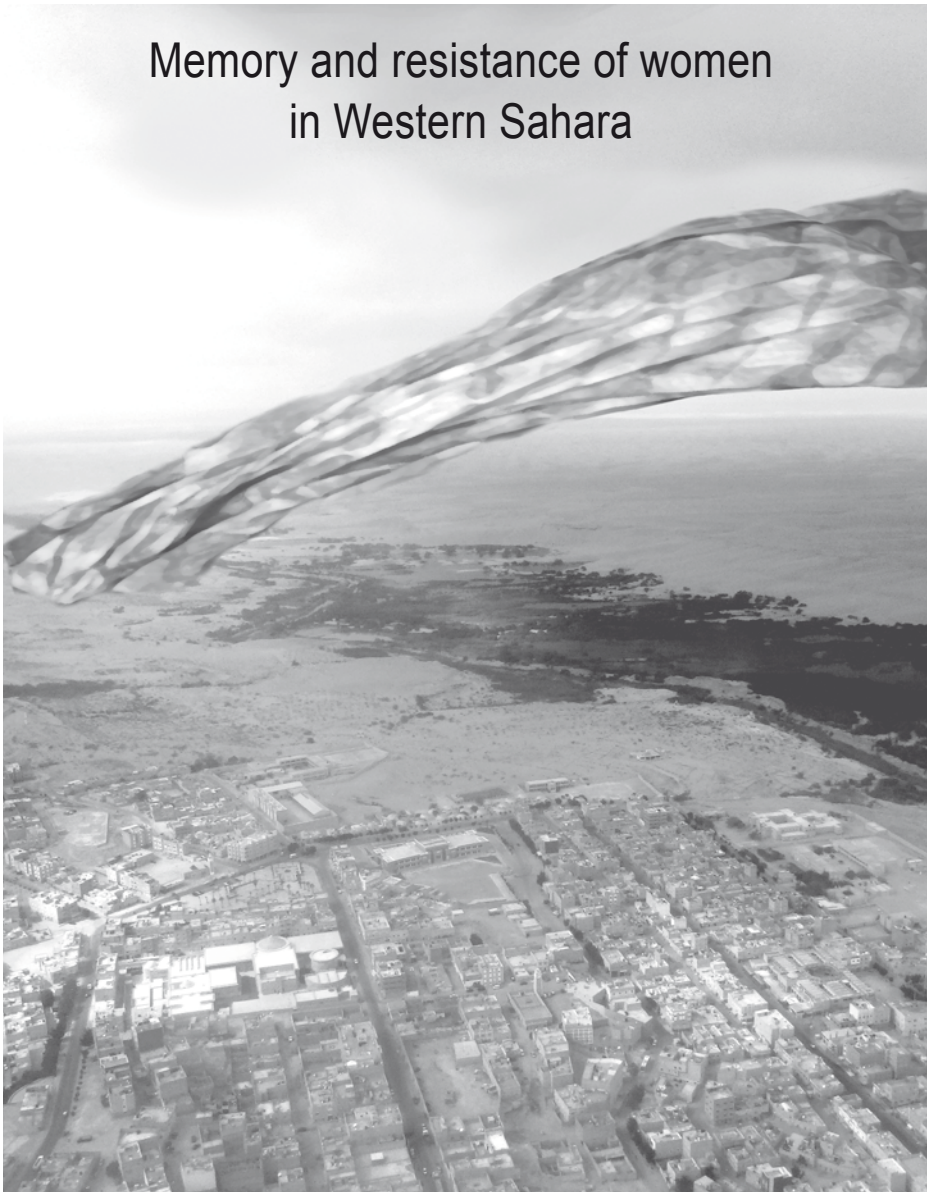

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Index

This publication is dedicated to the Sahrawi women who continue to struggle for their rights and dignity. In particular, we thank El Ghalia Djimi for her initiative, determination and kindness in this process. This work has been possible thanks to women survivors of Moroccan State violence; many others did not survive, and we also want to remember them. Although we are aware that the account of the facts is never enough to express the enormous suffering brought about by violence, we have learned that confidence, gazes of mutual understanding, listening, crying, embraces, laughter and deeply-felt respect are very valuable resources to help narrate the unspeakable.

Besides, this work would not have the same meaning and result if had not started off from an existing relationship between the women from the occupied territories and the Basque Network of Support for Sahrawi Women, with Arantza Chacón's special dedication and that of the Alava Association of Friends of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic.

Our heartfelt thanks to them all, *eskerrik asko*.

"When they took her to the police station a new round of torture started.
They beat her. She was stripped naked. They harassed her. Her eyes and her tears said it all for her. She was there for two weeks.
From there, she was taken to jail without going through any judges, proceedings or anything like that. Then, she was taken to another secret detention centre where she spent ten years in detention.

When she left in 1991 with a group of 321 people who had gone missing for three, ten or fifteen years, she was reunited with her family.
But there was only her son left. The little girl had died two months after her mother's arrest. Sukeina since then had not heard of her loved ones.
Nor had they had any news whatsoever from her.

On re-entering the world, the world literally collapsed on her.
When I ask her how she felt, she answers clutching her right breast, "It hurt me right here …'"

Nomad Memories (*Memorias nómadas*), 2013
Carlos Martín Beristain

"Memory should be fairer to women"
Sahrawi activist

Introduction

This work is part of a process that emerged at the initiative of Sahrawi women in the Western Sahara occupied territories. Its aim is to gather the historical memory of their activism from their own perspectives and experiences in a process in which they are accompanied by the Basque Network of Support for Sahrawi Women[1] and the Hegoa Institute.

Women's l contribution to the survival and independence of the Sahrawi people is both locally and internationally renowned and projected, to such an extent that there may even be a feeling that we have a comprehensive and accurate understanding of the diversity of forms of participation of Sahrawi women in the history of the armed and political conflict with Morocco. However, paradoxically, when reflecting in depth from one's own self-centred space of analysis, some women interviewed for this study expressed that *"Memory should be fairer to women"* or that *"women are absent and they do not know exactly why"*.

On one hand, as happened in many other places, we observe that what has been written about the conflict is strongly based on the historical and chronological aspects thereof, on its evolution and dynamics, and on the strategies of each of the states, the role of United Nations, etc. These are stories that at certain times even resemble the broadcasting a game of a forty-year long still unfinished chess game, in which the main actors move the pieces from circles of "high politics" and diplomacy.

From a feminist perspective, we consider that these are constructions of the memory of the conflict that are far from direct and deep-felt experience of thousands of people, who, generation after generation have endured sufferings derived from the decisions taken at that other level of the political game. Sahrawi women are a minority in the space of "higher politics" and the centres of power and, instead, a large majority in the spaces of the social base on which daily insecurity and violence live with particular impact on those living in the occupied territories.

1 The Basque Network of Support for Sahrawi Women (*Red Vasca de Apoyo a las Mujeres Saharauis*), which is supported by the Alava Association of Friends of the SADR, brings together organizations of solidarity with the Sahrawi people, several Basque municipalities and their Gender Equality departments, in addition to other entities such as Euskal Fondoa's Coordination Unit with Sahara, Emakunde and Eudel.

On the other hand, the socio-political participation of women in the Saharan conflict has different forms of expression. The most studied and recognized of which is the organization and management of the refugee camps in Tindouf (Algeria). To a lesser extent, there is a certain amount of knowledge on women's share as Polisario Front combatants during the war, an organization within which they assumed various military and logistic responsibilities. However, we tend to have even less knowledge about the political militancy and human rights activism by women from the period of the Spanish colonization and the subsequent illegal Moroccan occupation.

Logically, the conditions of repression and political and informational isolation that Morocco has imposed on the Sahrawi population is one of the factors that partly explains international ignorance on the living conditions and activism of Sahrawi women in the occupied zone and on the human rights violations they suffer. The policy of silencing the conflict in Western Sahara by Morocco, together with the complicity and inaction by the international community makes the task of reviving memory and providing a significance of political action to the process of revealing the facts from the past and present violence against Sahrawi women even more urgent.

Together with it, we believe that yet another factor that can explain such lack of knowledge of women's activism is that often it is carried out "in the shade", in the space of everyday life, in what is considered the "domestic" sphere, without being assessed and recognized as an important contribution or as "heroic" in the terms in which this concept usually understood. Male activism, however, tends to have more projection and social recognition.

This work seeks to make visible and focus women's political and human rights work in the occupied territories in their own terms. In this sense, we conceive the activation of historical memory as an instrument of change that can contribute to the empowerment of Sahrawi women. At the same time, we want to contribute to the documentation of the human rights violations they have confronted on a daily basis over the last forty years; ultimately it seeks a reading of the facts that starts with and focuses on the women themselves.

As we shall see, women have been victims of forms of violence in the recent history of the Western Sahara: because they are Sahrawi, because they are part of the Polisario Front or because they have relatives who are or have been accused of belonging to that organisation. They have also been subjected to violence because of their participation in the peaceful

resistance aiming for independence and because of their human rights advocacy. But also, as has happened in other contexts of armed conflict and political repression, violence follows certain gender logic, in that Sahrawi women have been and continue to be exposed to human rights violations because they are women.

Methodology

Starting points

We pooled from feminism's critical analysis framework as our first starting point. This led us to take a differential approach to examining the impact of armed and political violence faced by Sahrawi women and to deepen into their interpretation of history as political subjects of it.

What gave rise to this report was the interest taken by Sahrawi women themselves in working on historical memory. They specifically mentioned the need to use their own voices in all possible registers to bring to light their experiences, pain, losses and resistance over decades of uninterrupted struggle for independence. By putting the accent on their testimonies, women meet the very vital need of speaking for themselves, thereby defying and transforming the biases on how history is remembered which tend to sideline women's visions and action.

This work is thus based on the notion of historical memory built from the bottom up, in an attempt to re-situate the role played over history by those whose experiences and narratives do not fit in with official, centralist political discourse (Guzmán Orellana and Mendia Azkue, 2013). Here, the aim is to bring to light a part of history that has been stifled or fragmented by the Western Sahara conflict. This contributes not only to making a dent in the political impunity of Morocco, but also to eroding a patriarchal social system heavily based on symbolic violence against women.

As a second starting point, we took a human rights approach to all of the documented violence. The various consequences it has had on their personal, family and social lives of women are all associated with human rights in this study. We consider this approach to be unavoidable in any political analysis of the situation in Western Sahara.

Nevertheless, we are aware that the overall human rights framework is not free from androcentrism, which has characterised law in general. On the one hand, International Humanitarian Law is "inherently discriminatory given that its legal framework prioritises men, specifically male combatants, and often relegates women to the category of victims or confers them legitimacy merely when they perform child-raising functions" (Durham and O'Byrne, 2010: 4-5). On the other hand, international human rights law takes on a

formally equalitarian nature based on the general acknowledgement that human rights stand "for all persons" (Guillerot, 2009). Yet in practice very few of these human rights are seen to be safeguarded fully equally for all persons at all times.

If we bear in mind that armed conflict and political violence affect men and women differently and unequally, we cannot purport to have equalitarian results under law which, despite being ostensibly neutral, uses the masculine as its parameter for what is human and, consequently, as a yardstick for what is universal.

In this study we therefore assume that, bearing in mind the general impunity affecting all Sahrawi victims of Morocco's repression, in order for transformation to take place, it is strategic to contribute to analysing the added impunity factors women face when they attempt to exercise their rights to truth, justice and reparation.

Procedure

This qualitative study is based on the testimonies and thoughts of women interviewed in groups, and in two cases in one-on-one interviews[2], as well as on the analysis of audio-visual and bibliographical sources[3].

Most of the testimonies were offered in working groups held over five days in January 2015 in the Women's House (*Casa de las Mujeres*)[4] in

2 The first one-on-one interview was done with Hayat Erguibi in Vitoria-Gasteiz in 2015. This young woman activist was illegally detained and ill treated by the Moroccan police, and she is currently outside the occupied territories. The second interview was with Takbar Haddi in Bilbao in 2016. Her son was killed in Laayoune in February 2015 and since then she has been making every effort to seek justice.

3 We highlight the importance of the human rights research done in Western Sahara under the supervision of Carlos Martín Beristain, which resulted in the report The Oasis of Memory (*El oasis de la memoria*). This work was edited and published by the Hegoa Institute in 2012: <http://publicaciones.hegoa.ehu.es/publications/281>.

4 The Basque Network to Support Sahrawi Women has contributed to establishing several *Casas de las* Women's Houses (*Casas de las Mujeres*) in the Tindouf refugee camps, where training programmes have been held. In 2013, the Basque Network met in Laayoune with women human rights activists to create closer ties with them. One of the objectives they set was to establish a *Casa de las Mujeres* there. This is something that the Sahrawi women brought to fruition in 2014.

Laayoune. A total of 40 women aged between 20 and 70 residing in the occupied territories participated. The vast majority of these women activists are victims of grave human rights violations such as arbitrary detention, enforced disappearance, jailing, torture and other forms of violence, from the 1970s to the present. This means that their testimonies are as direct victims of the State of Morocco's violence. At the same time, they all share the condition of being the relatives of victims of human rights violations.

During the sessions, we sought avenues for focusing on 'us as women' and attaching value to experiences that could have been left "in the dark" or merely not registered as significant during the overall stock taking of the pain and the resistance. One example is the group's building a time line, which ended up taking shape as a spiral, enabling waves of mobilisation and repression involving different generations of women to be identified.

An exercise was performed to reconstruct memory of the most internationally well-known common historical milestones considered as such by the Sahrawis. In other words, the intention behind the methodology was for the participants to place their own historical milestones, be they individual, family or community milestones, that they considered to mark their paths in life, and for them to reflect upon the reasons they attach this special meaning to them. Naturally, at times reference was made to major events in the recent Sahrawi history, although by remembering these events from a personal perspective, the women were able to situate themselves in a position of greater political leadership in their history.

As part of the methodology, in order to link the Sahrawi women's activism with that of women in other peoples confronted with armed conflict and political violence, events from Guatemala, El Salvador and Colombia were analysed during the sessions. In addition to putting forward the violent events confronted by these women, information was provided regarding certain initiatives considered to be of interest from the impunity standpoint. Some were tied to investigation (Colombia), others involved psychosocial support for victims and demanding justice (Guatemala) while still others had to do with historical memory (El Salvador). Furthermore, this analysis helped these women to see themselves reflected in the experiences of other women and lent perspective to their thoughts about their own struggle. That is to say, by taking a certain distance to be able to identify new keys for potential action and consideration.

The sessions were recorded out of the express desire of the Sahrawi women and as part of an initiative to recover the historical memory of their activism. The sessions were conducted in the Hassani language with interpreting into Spanish. The working atmosphere was one of trust and active listening among the women in sharp contrast with the surveillance, harassment and hostility of the Moroccan police who continuously watched over the *Casa de las mujeres*. Police vans frequently surrounded the building and on different days some of the women were prevented from entering. The police even threw rocks at the windows of the house. The work took place against a backdrop of political siege and harassment experienced by the Sahrawis in the occupied territories.

Considering the risk that the women participating were exposed to, we decided that the names of the women would not be cited in the belief that the repression against them warranted caution to prevent jeopardizing their situation any further. For this reason, the testimonies appear in quotes and in italics without citing the source. At the same time, this work includes testimonies previously recorded in the documents consulted and also others derived from the personal interviews conducted. In these cases, women's names and sources are indicated in the footnotes.

Based on the recording and the notes systematically taken during the sessions, we built a rich corpus of material for analysis that served to shape and provide content for this study. In conjunction with this, we have done bibliographical work (prior human rights reports, features written on the conflict, specialized studies, news clips and so forth) to provide context and a broader base for women's testimonies.

We are aware of this study's constraints. There were obstacles in working and circulating normally in the occupied territories that prevented more interviews from being conducted in Laayoune and other Western Sahara cities. Also, although we attempted to continue our work on a further visit, Morocco prevented us from entering the area. Because of these constraints, issues relating to violence and its impact that warrant careful, in-depth attention due to the difficulties and the pain involved in expressing certain issues, and issues related to the demands for truth, justice and reparation of Sahrawi women have not been able to be developed as we would have liked.

1. Women's political and human rights activism in the occupied territories

The decision to fight: significant moments and referents

Sahrawi women's decision to become involved in the resistance to the occupation is tied to their desire to live in a free Western Sahara. Their motivation, then, is no different than that expressed by Sahrawi men and, in any event, is common to the experience expressed by those subjected to military occupation and political violence around the globe over history.

Furthermore, these women's involvement ties straight in to violent events directly affecting their personal and family histories. In other words, the fact that they and/or their family members had been victims of repression stands as another decisive factor in their determination to associate politically.

In addition to the above, a third factor for women's motivation to participate added to these previous two is that once and again in their narratives, figures of other women emerge as direct referents that impacted their decision. These women are usually close to them and are nearly always family members, i.e. sisters, mothers, grandmothers, aunts… whose experience is underscored as the first and closest example of a struggle instilling admiration, motivation and conviction leading to activism.

While the referents normally mentioned among men are those collectively considered to be great leading figures in the revolution and the war, such as both Basiri[5] and El Uali Mustafa Sayed[6], among women, the hallmark of strength for the political struggle is found in affective-family bonds and in

5 Mohamed Basiri was the founder and Secretary General of *Organización de Vanguardia para la Liberación de Saguia el Hamra y Río de Oro*, established in 1969 underground. This organization was to put together the Sahrawi independence movement. Basiri was arrested and disappeared by the Spanish authorities in 1970 and has since been considered the longest standing disappeared Sahrawi.

6 El Uali Mustafa Sayed is one of the Sahrawi struggle's major historical leaders. He was one of the founders of the Polisario Front and was appointed Secretary General of that organization at its second congress. Elected as the first president of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) in February 1976, he died in combat in November of that same year.

activism. This emerged during the interviews as they evoked their memory and identified the historical milestones that resonated the most for them.

The struggle against colonialism

In her well-know work The Sahrawi Cause and Women (La *causa saharaui y las mujeres*, 1998) Dolores Juliano takes an anthropological look at women's status in Sahrawi society in order to explain their level of political participation. According to the historical research she cites, Bedouin tradition assigned a significant role to women in the administration of goods and the functioning of nomadic communities. The way Sahrawi families were organized enabled women to move about relatively independently. This is reflected, for instance, in their ability to receive both female and male visitors while at home alone, or to come and go as they pleased from the family abode without depending on their husbands' permission[7].

> *"She, as a woman, in her* haima *tent, her abode, could receive guests, could see them off, and could actually do as she pleased. She had her word and respected it inside the family. Men were away for long periods of time and left women by themselves in the full trust that they would run the family. Women took care of all financial and social matters, had friendships with other men, and their fathers, brothers or husbands trusted them knowing that they could run the family and take care of everything. Women earned themselves this trust over history and over their entire contribution to the struggle"* (Abba, cited by Juliano, 1998: 51-52).

During the 20th century, this is attributed to the intensification of Spain's colonization and a gradual process of becoming more sedentary which led to a gradual loss of freedom for women, particularly in cities. It marked a period in which women's lives become more difficult as they could no longer go out or enjoy the social relationships they weaved together in their nomadic lifestyle. Actually there is a widespread notion that the erosion in Sahrawi women's status owes to Spanish colonialism, and particularly the deep-lying social and demographic change that gave rise to the growth of

7 According to Juliano (1998: 50-51), elements from ancient traditions that contributed to distinguishing Sahrawi women's status from that of other Muslim peoples in that part of the world included the lack of gender segregation (men and women shared public and private space alike), the lack of use of veils, and women's independence.

cities and the end of Sahrawi nomadism (Juliano, 1998; Perregaux, 1999; Medina Martín, 2014).

During the 1960s and 1970s, the germination and maturing of the revolutionary process that gave rise to the creation of the Polisario Front in 1973 is generally interpreted as an opportunity for women to recover part of that lost freedom because the revolutionary period "was to give them a new opportunity to prove their organizational qualities and lead them to fight to rid themselves of their specific oppression" (Perregaux, 1999: 130).

On this issue, while particularly focusing on linking Sahrawi women's traditional pre-colonial status to their organization in the Tindouf refugee camps, Juliano also places Sahrawi women on the front line of the struggle against Spanish colonialism, and cites the following quote from a Sahrawi woman from that period:

> *"During the 1960s, the Front was initially formed against Spain until 1970 or 1973. All of us women rebelled against Spanish colonialism and were the first to join the fight and take on positions of responsibilities and answer the call to stand up against colonialism, and at the beginning, nearly all of the cells, most of them, were made up of women"* (cited in Juliano, 1998: 83-84).

In line with this, the first key historical milestones indicated by the women interviewed for this study go back to 1958, the year that Spain and France allied to put an end to the anti-colonial insurgence in the area. During the two months that the so-called *Operación Teide* lasted "more than 100 aircraft, nearly 20,000 soldiers and hundreds of pieces of artillery took on a two-pronged pincer operation in which the aviation thoroughly laminated insurgent areas with shrapnel and phosphorous, and swept away along with it everything that moved. (…) Thousands of persons left behind their belongings and livestock and reached the bleak town of Tan Tan a state of absolute misery. As long as Spain remained in the Sahara, they could never return. The border was tightly sealed, and from that time on it became known as the Red Line" (García, 2010: 39-40).

The peaceful revolts against Spain's colonial presence in Zemla in 1970 took on a very special, significant place in the collective remembrance of the women interviewed. Indeed, the so-called "Zemla events" were etched in the collective memory of the Sahrawi people. At that time in history, with a new generation of Sahrawi youth willing to continue the

anti-colonial struggle, on 17 June a crowd protested in Laayoune in favour of independence. In the evening the protest gathered in the Zemla quarter where the Spanish Legion opened fire with a "hail of shots that left an undetermined number of persons dead or wounded. This was followed, on that same night, by a wave of detentions and disappearances of Sahrawis, including Basiri" (García, 2010)[8].

It is difficult to find figures on the exact number of persons killed and wounded in Zemla, and on those subsequently detained, imprisoned and disappeared. And it is even more complicated to ascertain data disaggregated by gender. All in all, it is known that there were women, men, boys and girls in the popular uprising in Zemla that come from all regions of the country and gathered in the capital.

> *"It was a women, Mbarka Boujmajrouta, in exile with her husband in Mauritania after the Zemla events and Basiri's disappearance, who, by selling jewellery, helped fund the first Polisario Front congress there".*

> *"During the initial period of anti-colonial revolutionary work, very few people participated because that underground activism was dangerous".*

The women who joined the struggle during that period were very young and after the occupation many of them were imprisoned and/or expelled from the territory. These women were among the first set of women named by the activists interviewed as personal models:

> *"My sister belonged to the [anti-colonial] resistance. She was then in jail in 1976 and 1977, and in 1984 there was an ultimatum for her to leave the territory or else she would be imprisoned… My mother found out that [my sister] was on a Sahrawi search and arrest list and they helped her to escape".*

8 The events after his detention have yet to be clarified. Some sources indicate he "remained detained together with his fellow fighters in an individual cell in the Laayoune provincial prison until 16 July when no information was given as to his whereabouts" (see *Proyecto Desaparecidos: Sáhara Occidental* at http: www.desaparecidos.org). Other sources assert that: "according to the police version, after three hours of detention, he was taken to the border and expelled from Morocco. However, it has been confirmed that after having been tortured, at dawn he was taken to the dunes near Laayoune and executed" (García, 2010: 49).

The war

The Moroccan occupation in Western Sahara the 6th of November, 1975, and the Polisario Front's engagement in war with Morocco and Mauritania[9] marked heavy militarization of everyday life for the Sahrawi people. In the historical experience of women throughout the world, militarization and armed violence go hand in hand with a heightened division of gender roles and an increase in violence against them. In Western Sahara, the occupation and war fully impacted Sahrawi women's life choices and decisions.

Many men joined the military struggle and, although there were also some women fighting with the Polisario Front, most of them took care of survival, of caring for and financially and emotionally sustaining the rest of the family. However, this division of roles cannot lead us to overlook the fact that many women, as they took on that traditional gender mandate, participated at the same time in the underground struggle against the occupation by doing highly risky political work. In many cases, this cost them their lives and left a profound mark on those who survived.

As a result of the Moroccan occupation, a significant portion of the Sahrawi people began an exodus in the desert. Most of those involved in this desperate flight were women, owing to the fact that forced migration is one armed conflict's impacts that is disproportionately suffered by women (Amnesty International, 2005). Most often, the explanation for this is that, due to traditional roles, men more often tend to be combatants while women are more often the ones who either remain in their homes or are forced to flee.

The Sahrawi's displacement in the desert was basically forced by bombardment by the Moroccan military aviation, which used phosphorous and also napalm. According to international law, bombing the civilian population is a war crime. In Western Sahara, these bombings primarily affected women because, again, most of those who fled the occupation were women. Recent research on Moroccan bombings has shown that, for instance, 64% of the Um Dreiga bombing victims were women of varying ages (Martín Beristain *et al.*, 2015: 37).

9 Spain has the historical and political responsibility stemming from the signing of the Tripartite Agreements in Madrid, an illegal pact whereby Spain left Western Sahara and enabled Morocco and Mauritania to divvy it up without first de-colonizing the territory, as it was the mandate of the United Nations.

Furthermore, the harsh conditions that forced migrations generally produce, here including persecution, harassment and direct attacks, mean that many women die not only due to direct violence, in this case the bombings, but also to exhaustion, starvation or illnesses stemming from displacement and/or diseases that would have been treatable under other circumstances[10].

Throughout the world, women who have been able to survive forced migration face a host of problems due to significant personal, family and social destabilization. The economic impact is also very great, given that loosing a home and a living when fleeing puts a person in a highly vulnerable financial situation. Added to this is the fact that women are caretakers for children, the elderly, those with disabilities and the wounded. Indeed, Sahrawi women who survived their fleeing in the desert faced these same problems. As is well known, they also showed themselves to be highly capable of rebuilding community life. As refugees in Tindouf, they took on leading roles in civilian organization and maintaining the camps[11] which, over time, became one of the most studied and internationally highlighted examples of refugee women's organizational capacity[12].

The overall figures point towards more than half of the Sahrawi population having settled in the Tindouf camp, grouping together more than 165,000 people, while roughly 40,000 remained in the territories occupied by Morocco (Hegoa and Aranzadi, 2014).

10 In Guatemala, the Memory of Silence (*Memoria del Silencio*) report put out by the Commission for Historical Clarification (*Comisión de Esclarecimiento Histórico* - CEH) includes, due to its breadth, a separate category of "death due to forced displacement" as a grave human rights violation occurring during the armed conflict there (1960-1996). Although the data are not disaggregated by gender, the CEH indicated that there were 1,933 cases of persons who died of forced displacement, and that 451 of them were children or elderly (CEH, 1999: chapter II, volume 3).

11 The camps are structured around four *wilayas* comprised of six *dairas* each, which in turn are made up of four neighbourhoods each. The women organized and took on management positions in the five basic service committees (Education, Health, Distribution and Food, Handicraft Production and Justice and Social Affairs) in each neighbourhood.

12 Other examples that have been highlighted are those of Salvadoran women in refugee camps in Honduras during the war in El Salvador (1980-1992), and Colombian women displaced from rural areas to peri-urban environments or neighbouring countries. In this last case, certain research has pointed to displaced Colombian women being more resilient than men in the same circumstances, particularly when it comes to their ability to begin making a living in the informal economy, and their ability to rebuild the family structure and generate new social support and friendship networks (Meertens, 2001).

Though in a different context, Sahrawi women in the occupied territories faced violence and personal loss with the same severe suffering as the women in the camps and, likewise, maintained steadfast political action and conviction.

> *"My grandmother already had three children fighting with the Polisario Front, and decided to also send her fourth son, the youngest, with the message that they were not to return to say goodbye to her before she died because they had to continue to struggle to meet the ultimate goal of independence. (…) My grandmother, who lost her children and suffered torture herself but who never stuck her head in the sand, was always my example. She always stood tall and I took her example in 1992 so that our children would not experience that same separation and that torture".*

The war was a period with hundreds of killings, forced disappearances, torture and death in combat. Forced disappearance, including that of women, was systematically practiced in the occupied territories as well as in certain towns in southern Morocco where the Sahrawi population was significant.

The families lost many of their members, and girls and young women had to take on the duties of caring for their elders or younger siblings at an early age, which closed the door to their educational opportunities, Furthermore, the increased workload against a backdrop of emergency and want meant that many had to postpone their decision to actively participate in the Sahrawi struggle until many years later.

When remembering those terrible years full of pain and sadness, women were able to recover anecdotes that provided the collective remembrance with a profound humanity:

> *"One night my mother wanted to listen to the Polisario Front radio, and in order to listen to it clandestinely she went inside a cupboard. She told me to stand watch to make sure no one was coming, but I went to play with other children and forgot to go back to open the closet door for my mother… She nearly suffocated… Ever since, when she would go into the closet to listen to the radio, I had to stand right there until my mother came out…".*

The Sahrawi National Radio, first broadcast on 28 December 1975, took on centre stage in the lives of women and their families, particularly during the

initial years of Morocco's occupation. In the occupied territories, *"the radio was the only way to know what was going on"*. This is how another one of the women remembers it:

> *"In order to follow the news, I remember that we had to go into a room at the very back of the house. We would hide and listen to the radio under a blanket at night, and in the morning we would spread the news"*.

During the war, women had a great participation in the underground work of awareness-raising and political training among the population, in a time when it was impossible the mobilisation in the streets.

In 1987, when a delegation from the United Nations and the Organization of African States visited to examine the possibilities of holding a self-determination referendum, the Sahrawi people prepared a major demonstration to express their dissatisfaction with the occupation and stake a claim to their right to self-determination. During that period, known as the 1987 intifada, the Moroccan forces stepped up their repression and several detentions and expulsions took place. The detention and forced disappearance of some the Sahrawi activists interviewed took place during that period.

Furthermore, just as had occurred at the outset of the occupation, the situation triggered the displacement of further groups of people towards the refugee camps in Tindouf. Impotence in the face of the repression became unbearable for those who fled at that time:

> *"We finally decided to execute our plan to flee. The detentions, imprisonment and curfew decreed for the UN Technical Committee's visit in November 1987, put an end to our patience"*[13].

After the ceasefire

Among the consequences of the war, the Association of Family Members of Sahrawi Prisoners and Disappeared (*Asociación de Familiares de Presos*

13 Safia Jahtri Yumani, cited by Perregaux (1999: 27). Actually, since the illegal occupation of the territory, Sahrawi men and women have not ceased to flee to escape the violence. While exile was massive in 1976, during the 1980s and up the present people continue to flee to the Tindouf camps or other countries, although on a much smaller scale and with greater difficulties given the Moroccan military wall dividing Western Sahara in two and, overall, grave limitations on the Sahrawi population's right to free circulation.

y Desaparecidos Saharauis AFAPREDESA 2008: 37) had accounted for 500 disappeared persons of whom no one was ever to hear from again. The State of Morocco denied their existence and has not provided any type of information as to their whereabouts. The Association accounted for 378 disappeared persons who did reappear after having been kidnapped for between 4 and 16 years in secret detention centres in Agdez, Kalaat Maguna, Shoura and Laayoune.

There were a total of 321 detained/disappeared who were able to survive the Moroccan prisons and were freed at the time of the ceasefire in 1991. The remaining 57 would have died in Moroccan secret detention centres, although their remains have never been delivered to their families. Among the group freed in 1991, 73 were women.

A year after the 1991 ceasefire, the 1992 Intifada was another historical landmark highlighted by the women interviewed and particularly those who become involved in the political struggle at that time through their participation in the student movement. That year, the Sahrawi population mobilized in peaceful demonstrations organized by underground student cells including many young women.

> *"We acted with a great deal of strength and courage while at the same time we felt afraid, especially of torture and the impact around is, on our families and neighbourhoods…".*

Several students, men and women alike, later to be known as the "Zahra Bousaoula group", were detained, tortured and imprisoned. The following testimony was offered by one of those students when remembering the seconds before she was detained, at the age of 16, when the Moroccan police broke into her house in the middle of the night after one of the demonstrations:

> *"My mother told me I had done the right thing, but you could tell it hurt her. She told me that whatever happened, although they cut me up into pieces, I should never give names. She encouraged me. She supported me. I understood that my mother was telling me that my destiny was irreversible but that it wasn't necessary for anyone else to be taken… That's where I saw how solid Sahrawi women are".*

Knowing that you will be subject to torture when detained is a constant in the women's testimonies, and this gives an indication of the extent to which the State of Morocco's perpetration of this grave human rights

violation was widespread and systematic in Western Sahara. Despite their fear and suffering, the women had a deep conviction about the legitimacy of the cause they defended. At the same time, they identify their Sahrawi womanhood with a special inner strength and resistance.

Since the 2000s

Among the younger women interviewed, the 2005 Intifada marked the most significant personal landmark triggering their organized participation. Once again, they had other women as direct models. It was then that they became fully aware that they belonged to a new generation of Sahrawi women suffering retaliation.

> *"I began as an activist in 2006, and my main reason was my mother and my aunt's participation in the 2005 demonstrations. That time they didn't let the children go. (…) In 2006 they did let me participate and as of then I was beaten in the demonstrations".*

Since the 2005 Intifada, the breadth of women's participation in protests has become more evident. At the same time, ill treatment, insults and vexation to be denounced and become known to a greater extent internationally, particularly through secretly recorded videos. The decade of the 2000s has marked a significant turning point in the visibility of the repression against women as compared with the so-called "years of lead"[14].

In this respect, women point towards an evolution in the action of the Moroccan security forces. They identify greater police organization and bolstering of various types of repression in the decade of the 2000s. The police were in greater numbers and their presence was more visible. Comparatively speaking, in the 1990s the Moroccan security forces did not need to have more officers or be more visible because enforced disappearance was used as the most widespread form of repression, and also because it was not considered likely for the Sahrawis to have the capacity to wage another intifada after the 1987 detention and disappearance campaign.

14 The expression "years of lead", used to refer to the period of greatest intensity of violence exerted by the State of Morocco against any type of political dissidence, spanned the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. This period had a particular impact on the Sahrawi people in the occupied territories.

> *"The difference between that period and the 1990s is that now people know what the Moroccans are capable of. When we were freed in 1991, no one came to see us or talk to us. No one found out there were women who had been disappeared for 16 years. If this had happened in another country, the international community would have taken action to ascertain the truth about the phenomenon [enforced disappearance] which is a crime against humanity"*[15].

At the end of the 2000s there was another landmark event for the women interviewed: the 2010 Intifada and the uprising in the Gdeim Izik camp in the outskirts of Laayoune. Nearly 20,000 gathered there, united to stake a claim for the Sahrawis' economic and social rights camped in over 7,000 *haima* tents. The gathering grew over the course of a month until on 8 November the camp was dismantled violently by the Moroccan security forces causing several deaths. In addition, in the days following the dismantling, protests and confrontations between Sahrawi demonstrators and Moroccan police and civilians took place. There were several deaths, looting, destruction in Sahrawi homes and the security forces detained up to 200 persons.

According to the women's testimony, mainly for the younger ones, Gdeim Izik marked a historical opportunity to belong to a *continuum* of the collective resistance of their people.

> *"Before I wouldn't have been able to participate although I wanted to. I was afraid that something would happen to me and that I wouldn't be able to take care of my grandparents…I had to make up for that with my participation in Gdeim Izik. I didn't actually have any material request but I needed to and wanted to be there and I was happy because they wanted me to be there. It was very tough and yet I felt happy".*

After the dismantling of the Gdeim Izik camp and the new wave of repression that ensued in 2011 and 2013, the Moroccan police reorganized. They increased their numbers and their visibility, both in uniform and plain clothes. The presence of the army also increased together with the police. A closed military occupation ensued with the main cities taken by the Moroccan policy and military apparatus.

15 El Ghalia Djimi, testimony included in the report The Memory Oasis (*El oasis de la memoria)* (2012, Volume I: 417).

In 2014, concerned about their international image regarding respect for human rights, the Moroccan army and police began to be less visible again. The security forces had less of a presence despite the fact that they were exercising constant *de facto* surveillance and harassing the Sahrawi people.

Specifically, the women interviewed for this study denounced that since 2015 the police have brought about a siege around them and the *Casa de las Mujeres*, and this greater pressure exerted on them further thwarts their exercising their right to assembly and organize.

The content of the struggle: heroism behind the scenes

In the recent history of Western Sahara, Sahrawi women in the occupied territories have participated socially and politically in a host of ways that have given rise to the everyday doings of thousands of women of different ages. Their diverse, broad-based, inter-generationally sustained activism stands in contrast to the actual knowledge, recognition and significance of their work. This chapter aims to describe the heroic deeds performed by these women through peaceful resistance.

Survival and collective work

Sahrawi women's contribution to the survival of their families and communities is most often recognized in their participation in the Sahrawi common cause, and particularly so in the communities living in refuge. Sahrawi women, and even the youngest among them, mutually recognize this. Their conviction is that they have received an accumulation of their forbearers' work of as a sort of legacy.

> "*Although I haven't experienced it myself, I am aware that all of the camps were erected by Sahrawi women: the* haima *tents, the schools, the health care…It was all the work of women*".

Care, a role historically assigned to women during normal times, becomes vital during times of widespread violence and human rights violations and even marks the difference for survival. Just as in the Tindouf camps, in the occupied territories it has been women who have played the main caretaking roles in very harsh physical conditions.

> *"We women had heaps of responsibility when the men went away to fight. The husbands left behind children and their mothers…and extreme poverty. More than what was bearable. That's why I think women's historical memory is very important".*

> "*When I was 15 I realized how elderly my grandparents were and that they had no one, no children, to take care of them. I stopped studying and I devoted myself to them*".

While this role of survival and group work has been socially assigned to women, it tends to merely be considered "normal", and thus is not analysed at all. Yet it must be underscored firstly that their work sustains life overall and here it sustains the continuation of the Sahrawi people per se. Secondly, it has a cost for these women as it erodes their chances of personal growth and development in the sphere of education, job performance, and even social and political participation.

Claiming for self-determination and denouncing the occupation

The women interviewed showed sharp political clarity regarding the right to self-determination and its unrenouncibility for the Sahrawi people. It is a core claim for them and their action therefore hinges around it.

The women point not only towards Morocco's responsibility in denying the right to self-determination, but also to the historical responsibility of other countries directly involved in the conflict such as Spain and France that continue to put their own economic and geopolitical interests first and act in collusion with Morocco.

Obviously, exercising self-determination is affected by the occupation of Western Sahara territory, among other factors. This visibly ties the two claims, self-determination and the end of the occupation, together in women's action. After their opposition to Spanish colonization, since 1975 women activists have waged an on-going struggle against occupation and the impact it has on their lives.

Women's claims are exercised not only in the occupied territories, but also in universities and other educational institutions in Morocco where some of the women study either specialized or higher education. Their activism thus spreads out geographically beyond the occupied area while they are

outside it, where these women face the same violence as they do in their places of origin.

Preserving cultural identity

This cause for action crops up once and again in the activists' discourse and on their agenda. The women attached significant weight to it because of the need to defend their identity in the face of Moroccan attempts to erase the Sahrawis' cultural identity.

These attempts range from altering the demography, triggered by Morocco with its Green March and the promotion of subsequent waves of migration, to imposing a *curriculum* in school and manipulating the media. These two spheres serve as ideological channels by which Morocco attempts to blur Sahrawi's identifying traits. On top of this comes direct repression of Sahrawi ways of life and cultural expression deeply intertwined with nomadism:

> *"The Moroccan regime ridiculed Sahrawi culture and heritage, and even installed an iron curtain between us and our values, our customs and our culture. The Moroccan armed forces forced nomads to leave their lands, their pastures and so forth. The army organized a forced move of Sahrawi nomads into the cities, killed their cattle, contaminated their wells and scattered landmines all over the Western Sahara desert"*[16].

The first memories of the women interviewed on their political activity to defend Sahrawi cultural identity go back to the 1970s. This type of action is charged with symbolism and has often been expressed by vindicating Polisario Front flags and those of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR).

> *"In 1974 I was left alone with three children. I did a lot of awareness raising work. I sold dresses [to get by] but with the sewing machine I made flags for national holidays and demonstrations. Later they arrested me, also they took my sewing machine away… I was disappeared for eight years".*
>
> *"In 1977 there was a visit by a delegation of United Nations envoys.*

16 Lakhlifi (2012: 313).

> *There were 70 of us women who demonstrated and one man… Under our clothes we women had Sahrawi flags, and when we were surrounded by the police we took out the flags".*

> *"[In 1979] I remember that my mother and my aunt weaved the Polisario Front flags. I was little [6 years old] but I saw that they were weaving and then they hid the machines under the floor. They did it even when my father got home, they hid them".*

In their own contexts of resistance, the youngest women have carried forward with this vindication of their identity hinging around the national flag.

> *"While I was a student [in Rabat] some other girls and I took some big sheets and we painted a flag; we hung it on a building in front of where there was going to be an art congress".*

> *"I participated in school and I drew flags".*

Participation in human rights organizations

Mobilization to defend human rights in Western Sahara has gained steam over the last decade thanks to the establishment of different associations specializing on the issue. The human rights movement is currently encompassed by an umbrella group of associations and Sahrawi human rights committees that brings together several organizations:

- Group of Sahrawi Human Rights Defenders (*Colectivo de Defensores Saharauis de los Derechos Humanos*, CODESA).
- Sahrawi Association of Victims of Grave Human Rights Violations committed by the State of Morocco (*Asociación Saharaui de Víctimas de Violaciones Graves de Derechos Humanos cometidas por el Estado de Marruecos*, ASVDH).
- Sahrawi Women's Future Forum (*Foro Futuro de la Mujer Saharaui*, FAFESA).
- Committee of the Mothers of the 15 disappeared (*Comité de las Madres de los 15 desaparecidos).*
- Sahrawi Observatory on women and children (*Observatorio saharaui de la mujer y del niño*).

- Committee for the Defence of the Right to Self-Determination (*Comité de Defensa del Derecho a la Autodeterminación*, CODAPSO).
- Committee to Support the UN Peace Plan and Protect Natural Resources (*Comité de apoyo al plan de paz de la ONU y a la protección de los recursos naturales*).
- Sahrawi Association for the Protection and Dissemination of Culture and Heritage (*Asociación Saharaui para la Protección y la Difusión de la Cultura y del Patrimonio*).
- Gdeim Izik Platform (*Plataforma de Gdeim Izik*).
- Sahrawi Centre for Conserving Collective Memory (*Centro saharaui para conservar la memoria colectiva*).
- Group of 19 Abandoning Moroccan Nationality (*Grupo de los 19 que abandonaron la nacionalidad marroquí*).

The women's human rights movement has been playing a fundamental role both in establishing several of the previously mentioned organizations and in maintaining activism within them, although this is not always reflected in the leadership of these organizations and in women's representational roles affording them visibility in the outside world.

Among the organizations, several are led by women as either Chairs or Vice Chairs. One of them is the Sahrawi Human Rights Defenders Group (*Colectivo de Defensores Saharauis de los Derechos Humanos*, CODESA) directed by Aminatou Haidar, one of the most recognized activists both nationally and internationally. In November 1987 she was one of the 17 women arrested and disappeared that Morocco illegally kept in secret prisons for four years until she was freed in 1991. Before CODESA was founded, Aminatou Haidar participated in groups such as the Coordinating Committee for Victims of Forced Disappearances and Arbitrary Detentions (*Comité de Coordinación de las Víctimas de Desapariciones Forzadas y Detenciones Arbitrarias en el Sáhara Occidental*) in 1994 and the Committee for the Liberation of Tamek and all Sahrawi Prisoners (*Comité para la liberación de Tamek y todos los prisioneros saharauis*).

Despite the fact that Morocco prohibited the CODESA founding congress, it has been in existence since 2007. It was founded by a group of people from the Forum for Truth and Justice of Western Sahara (*Foro de la Verdad*

y la Justicia del Sáhara Occidental), legalized in Morocco in 2003. CODESA works intensively on research and denouncement of human rights violations as well as support for Sahrawi victims. As a result of its work, the organization and its members are repressed by Morocco. After spending four years as a detainee-disappeared person and being tortured, Aminatou Haidar was freed only to continue to suffer from persecution, harassment, beatings and being wounded for her political activism and from publicly manifesting her opinions.

The Vice Chair of the Sahrawi Association of Victims of Grave Human Rights Violations committed by the State of Morocco (*Asociación Saharaui de Víctimas de Violaciones Graves de Derechos Humanos cometidas por el Estado de Marruecos*, ASVDH) is El Ghalia Djimi, who co-founded the organization on 7 May 2005. Like Aminatou Haidar, El Ghalia Djimi was arrested in November 1987 and was disappeared to a secret Moroccan prison until 1991, and underwent several different types of torture during that period. The ASVDH conceives itself as the outcome of different experiences in the struggle for human rights within the Sahrawi movement and is firmly based on the conviction of active non-violent resistance.

The Sahrawi Women's Future Forum (*Foro Futuro de la Mujer Saharaui*, FAFESA) is an association established in February 2009 to vindicate the rights of the Sahrawi people through a peaceful struggle. The association, presided over by Sukeina Yedehlu, has a 16 member Executive Committee and some 60 women activists and collaborators.

Sukeina Yedehlu was born in 1957 in Gueltat Zemur into a nomadic family and was disappeared for more than 11 years in five different secret Moroccan prisons where she was tortured. When she was arrested in 1981, she had four children, the youngest, only five months old at the time, died just after she was forcibly disappeared. Although she was freed in 1991, she was once again arrested in 1992 after participating in a protest over a speech by King Hassan II, and for a year and a half thereafter, the atrocities she had been subjected to for so many years were repeated.

The Forum is made up principally of former political prisoners, survivors of torture, who perform several activities which, in their own words, have to do with:

> *"Morally and financially assisting women who have suffered in prison, both personally and through their loved ones. (…) We take up*

> *collections in the community to help those affected because women are always those who suffer the most, both when they are arrested or when their family members are; they are the ones who have to sustain their families, either with or without their husbands"*[17].

Another FAFESA leader and activist stated that:

> *"Some think that being free is simply not being in jail or not being tortured. We Sahrawi women understand the full concept"*[18].

Emphasis on consideration of the issues as women was also present in the mobilizations organized by the *Coordinadora de Asociaciones y Comités Saharauis de Derechos Humanos* on 15 March 2014 when FAFESA held a full day meeting in Smara bringing together more than 150 participants to discuss the conditions of Sahrawi women and freedom of association, constantly thwarted by the authorities.

Furthermore, the organization held working sessions for young women on conveying Sahrawi culture from the standpoint of resistance to the cultural assimilation Morocco attempts to bring about. A denouncement was made regarding the prohibition of erecting traditional Sahrawi *haima* tents and using the names of historical Sahrawi figures for newborns.

The Committee of the Mothers of the 15 Disappeared was established by several women after their family members who were disappeared on 25 December 2005 during the Intifada led that year to vindicate self-determination for the Sahrawi people. Lalla Nhabouha Lakhlifi (2012: 313), a Committee member and a sister of one of those abducted, explains why they were led to establish their organization:

> *"The families of fifteen young Sahrawis are convinced that they have concrete evidence that their children were abducted and imprisoned by the Moroccan authorities. The Moroccan regime refuses to reveal the truth about their lot. And the same holds for hundreds of Sahrawis disappeared since 1975. This is why we established the Committee of the Mothers of the 15 Disappeared Sahrawis. The Committee organized a broad-based awareness-raising campaign to reveal the abuses committed against their children through peaceful sit-ins and*

17 Sukeina Yedehlu, cited in Zurutuza (2015).

18 Fatima Hamimid (ibid.).

> *hunger strikes. To date, the Moroccan regime has turned a deaf ear and refuses to release the 15 young Sahrawis who were abducted and who, according to our sources, are held in secret detention near Rabat".*

The Committee of Mothers has criticized the Moroccan judicial system's lack of political will, neutrality and transparency, and has filed a complaint in this regard for the abduction and disappearance of their family members without having obtained any reply whatsoever to date. Rather on the contrary, the Committee members have been subject to repression and intimidation for their work.

Clearly aware of how important it is for there to be a written record of these events, the women in these organizations and others perform thorough, imperative work to document and denounce human rights violations.

Defending natural resources

Over recent years, the Sahrawi people have achieved visibility for their questioning of Morocco's international legitimacy to sign agreements and explore for and extract natural resources in Western Sahara and benefit from those agreements reached bilaterally or with the European Union or with multinational companies. For instance, phosphate extraction and the fishing industry along the Sahrawi coast generate major revenue for Morocco and these foreign companies alike[19].

While the argument put forward by Morocco is that this extraction benefits the territory, what is certain is that the Sahrawi population remains socially and economically excluded. "Since the Moroccan invasion of Western Sahara

19 Insofar as Spain is concerned, its companies continue to engage in extracting natural resources such as phosphate. Coupled with this, its agreements with Morocco to exploit fish stocks off the Sahrawi coast must also be added. The European Union has been characterised by being enormously lax in its demands that Morocco respect human rights in Western Sahara. This attitude is related to the signing of collaboration agreement with Morocco in the fishing industry, the last one in 2014. The Polisario Front lodged an appeal against this Agreement before the European General Court in 2012, and in December 2015 the Court ruled that Western Sahara "does not belong to Morocco and that State is not an Administrating Power in that territory. The Court asserts that, before approving the decision, the Council had to first have made sure that the exploitation of natural resources in the territory was not in detriment to its inhabitants and their fundamental rights" (Soroeta, 2016).

in 1975, the Moroccan authorities have illegally exploited the territory, abundant in natural resources, and used the proceeds to maintain their occupation. The job opportunities resulting from this exploitation go to the Moroccan colonizers drawn there by tax breaks, subsidies and housing schemes" (WSRW, 2010)[20].

The demands for ceasing the occupation of the Western Sahara are thus linked to the demands for ceasing to exploit natural resources there, be they at sea or in mining, as this in the final instance is excluding and impoverishing the Sahrawis and mortgaging the future of generations to come.

Because they are directly affected, Sahrawi women are actively participating in this struggle to denounce the economic interest and exploitation of natural wealth of the Moroccan occupation policy. This type of action is very closely linked to that of women in other areas of the world with a long history of colonization and expropriation.

For instance, indigenous feminist women in Latin America indicate that expropriation of the territory-land must be analysed from a historical perspective in order to identify how the colonization that instated the dispossession and massive extraction of natural resources of the indigenous peoples is carried forward with the neoliberal extractive model and how both have affected the well being of women (Cabnal, 2010). Rethinking colonization and neo-colonization including its impact on women has led them to consider their bodies and their lives as part of that expropriation. From a critical perspective, they assert that during colonization a succession of patriarchies connected, namely the patriarchal configuration of the original peoples and the colonial patriarchy. For this reason, their position of "recovering and defending the territory-body" raises the underlying issue that women's struggle must begin by recognizing that, given the host of violence exerted against them, their bodies are the first territories that must be defended.

Although Sahrawi women activists' struggle is not imbued with this line of thinking (at least not explicitly), their opposition to colonist plundering of natural resources does fall in line with the *continuum* of expropriation of the land and lives of Sahrawi women.

20 In addition to the fact that this illegal exploitation leads to sustaining the occupation, one of the powers benefitting the most from it is the Moroccan army whose high-raking officials directly control and reap profits from the fishing industry (Shelley, 2005).

Supporting political prisoners

Commenting on Morocco's arresting and imprisoning of Sahrawis, AFAPREDESA (2008: 37) indicates that: "As of 1975 the Moroccan authorities have arrested, tortured and sentenced tens of Sahrawis to between one month and the death penalty. These sentences have been issued largely beyond the scope of due process and the most basic safeguards for a proper defence. Before bringing them before the Moroccan courts, the prosecutor holds them in secret prisons, in military detention centres, for periods of between one week and four years without anyone having any knowledge as to their whereabouts. During their stay in these secret prisons and detention centres, the vast majority of these prisoners are forced, under torture, to sign documents with false statements. They are convicted based on charges of suspected support for the Polisario Front or for having participated in social protests with political connotations, for instance demanding jobs, denouncing their living conditions, etc.".

Together with the political authorities and the state security forces, the responsibility for human rights violations also lies with the personnel in the Moroccan justice system, that is, with prosecutors and judges who have tried and systematically, without a single exception, convicted hundreds of Sahrawis[21].

Since the beginning of the occupation, and given the arbitrary detentions and forced disappearances, women, whether they were family members of those detained or disappeared or not, have continuously worked under very dangerous conditions to demand clarification of the actual facts and

21 Despite the reforms made to the Constitution of Morocco in 2011 to separate military and civilian justice, the military jurisdiction continues to try cases that are appropriate for civil courts. This "contributes to the lack of transparency and the refusal to investigate complaints of abuses" by the Moroccan authorities, as the Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel inhuman and degrading treatment, Juan E. Méndez himself, has stated (A/HCR/22/53/Add.2, para. 6). In this regard, Inés Miranda (2012: 310), attorney and member of the General Council of Spanish Advocates (*Consejo General de la Abogacía Española*) and international observer at several trials of Sahrawis held in the occupied territory since the decade of the 2000s asserts: "In these trials we have not seen any safeguards upheld, even when applying or examining Moroccan legislation, which is what is being used (…). The right to defence is not being upheld in that there is certainly no chance of debating or exercising the adversarial principle. The defence is not allowed to present any type of proof, or any type of argument attesting to the fact that what these men and women are being charged with is false, contrary to reality. (…). The trials are held in this climate of legal violence, in a manner of speaking".

also support those who were imprisoned and whose whereabouts are unknown. Their support for political prisoners, women and men alike, has been expressed through protests, vigils, international claims, and so forth.

Among the most recent prisoners are those known as the "Gdeim Izik group": 25 Sahrawis who, between the 1st and the 17th of February 2013 were tried in Rabat before a permanent military court for events in connection with the Gdeim Izik camp. They were sentenced to severe prison terms. Nine of them were sentenced to life imprisonment, four to 30 years, six to 20 years, and two to two years and three months. (*Asociación Internacional para la Observación de los Derechos Humanos*, 2013). Currently, all of the political prisoners in Moroccan prisons are men.

Some women have suggested that they have seen changes in Morocco's repressive policies towards women over recent years. They indicate that, thanks to the work of international human rights organizations and the media, they have been able to draw attention to the fate of disappeared and imprisoned Sahrawi women and that over the last few years there have been fewer of them tried and in prision. Instead, they tend to be detained in secret detention centres or police stations where they are tortured before they are released, normally after a few days (Allan and Lkhal, 2015: 29).

Likewise, among the women interviewed for this study, several have been abducted by the police and, blindfolded, led in a vehicle to a desert area outside Laayoune where they are beaten, harassed, threatened and later left there.

> *"First they put a cloth over my eyes, they handcuffed me, and seated me in the centre, they surrounded me. In the centre of the car there was a wheel. The cloth they used to cover me was dirty and foul smelling. I began to protest for being abducted, to demand an explanation why I was being arrested. The only answer was 'You know why. We're detaining your for writing graffiti on the walls in the neighbourhood of Maatala, for constantly receiving activists and for the rally held for Hmad Humad'. They asked me why I visited him, they began to beat me until we got to the desert. I don't know where the place they took me was. I think it's outside the city, in the desert. They started to call their superiors. I could recognize some of them"*[22].

22 Hayat Erguibi, personal interview, 2015.

> *"The police took me in a van to the outskirts of the city. They told me that they were going to rape me. They groped at me… I was very afraid".*

This mode of operation implies that, given certain achievements through advocacy done by Sahrawi and international human rights organizations, the State of Morocco has not desisted but merely modified its mechanisms for repressing women in order to detract from the visible consequences that the conflict has on them.

The way of struggle: the choice for non-violent resistance

A characteristic of Sahrawi women's activism in the occupied territories is that despite the degree of repression they face, they have held fast to their choice of strategy, peaceful resistance. This is expressed through demonstrations, outdoor sit-ins, disseminating videos, signature gathering and so forth. Choosing non-violent struggle is what has earned them greater visibility and put them more in the spotlight for their political action over the last two decades.

Hunger strikes are one of the types of action that they have chosen to defend their rights. Perhaps the best known hunger strike due to its international media repercussion was that of activist Aminatou Haidar in 2009. When she returned from New York to Laayoune after having received the Civil Courage Prize awarded by the Train Foundation from the United States, Morocco denied her entry into the territory because she did not write that she was a Moroccan citizen on her entry card presented at the border control. Aminatou Haidar therefore decided to begin a hunger strike in Lanzarote, where Morocco had expelled her. Her hunger strik e lasted 32 days, until she was finally allowed to enter Laayoune as a Sahrawi.

Another recent example is that of Tabkar Haddi, who in May 2015 began a hunger strike that was to last 36 days in front of the Moroccan consulate on the island of Gran Canaria to reclaim the corpse of her son, aged 21, who was attacked by a group of Moroccan settlers on 31 January and died days after from the wounds he suffered coupled with Morocco's refusal

to provide him with medical care[23]. Her main demand was to recover her son's corpse so that an independent autopsy could be done to diagnose and reveal the exact causes of his death. She also demanded that those responsible be tried. No investigation or arrest has taken place in this regard to date.

> *"I was waiting for two months for justice to be done, and because I had no response I spoke to my children and told them 'I don't know whether I'll come out of this alive or not'. My children told me they did not want to see me suffer, but I persisted. I went on a hunger strike for 36 days until I began to bleed from the nose"*[24].

In addition to her hunger strike, Tabkar Haddi has also practiced other forms of non-violent resistance such as remaining in public areas and gathering signatures in Spain in order to support her demands.

> *"I would go every day [for 9 months] even Sundays to the Plaza de la Feria [in Tenerife], to gather signatures to demand my son be exhumed and make many other demands. Once the 'Gag Law' was enacted the Spanish police came and told me I couldn't be there. The police threw me out and I asked them for a piece of paper to attest to that but they told me there would be none of that and they pushed me so that I would leave".*

As of 2005, activists have increasingly availed themselves of the more widespread use of the Internet to break the occupied territories' isolation. The younger Sahrawis, though not exclusively the younger ones, have used

23 The case of Mohamed Lamin Haidala is emblematic of a "foreboded death" by the Moroccan police. According to his mother's testimony, there was an attempt to kill Mohamed in 2013 by slitting the veins on his wrists. Because they were not successful, they told him "the next time we won't fail". Mohamed was stabbed on 31 January 2015 by Moroccan settlers with the police's knowledge and protection, after which he was gravely abandoned by health care personnel and immediately afterwards transferred to prison and tortured. This young man died a few days later, on 8 February, due to very serious injuries caused by the original wound in his neck, exacerbated by subsequent ill-treatment and lack of proper medical care. This lack of medical care from health care staff is frequent among Sahrawis both when it comes to common illnesses and to wounds caused by blows, beatings and torture by security forces or aggressions by Moroccan settlers, as was the case here.

24 Tabkar Haddi concluded her hunger strike when she was taken to the hospital due to her deliate health. Currently, the goitre she suffers as a result of her hunger strike as worsened.

audio-visual resources and social networks to document and disseminate the violence present in everyday life. Many women perform this type of work as amateurs while others do it professionally, for instance as part of groups of journalists from organizations such as Equipe Media, outstanding for its characteristic, intense counter-information to Morocco's local and international news on the occupied territories.

About strategies, some women defend the realisation of symbolic actions that have already carried out in other countries. However, their applicability to the Sahrawi situation is not always shared by all of the women.

> *"One of the things I thought was that at the [8th of March] demonstration we could hold a flower. Some of my colleagues were scandalized by my idea and said to me: 'I'm going to get hit by them, and I'm going to carry a flower?'. But I still would like to do that".*

Lastly, it can be highlighted that in their activism, Sahrawi women generate and maintain solidarity alliances with international human rights organizations, women's groups, cooperation groups, and certain academic institutions as a counter-weight to the isolation that the Sahrawi population is subject to and also to bring about change.

2. Violations of the human rights of sahrawi women

This chapter compiles facts and testimonies attesting to human rights violations directly experienced by Sahrawi women in the occupied territories, both in the past and the present. The violations are of their civil and political rights as well as their economic, social and cultural rights.

The violence perpetrated against Sahrawi women constitutes a corpus of actions contravening the human rights set forth in international law. However, we cannot overlook the fact that human rights violations are not the end sought by the perpetrators, but rather a means to achieve other ends.

In this regard, we consider that no research based on a human rights approach should omit the links between violence and its end. Otherwise, we would run the risk of focusing attention and denouncement merely on the consequences of the violence and would overlook a critical analysis of the factors generating it and, in the worst case, become complacent with minor gestures or improvements in terms of the perpetrators' respect for human rights[25].

This is why we underscore that in Western Sahara, the violence perpetrated by the State of Morocco is not exerted to "maintain security" as the main argument put forward by Morocco goes. Rather, it serves first the political objective of maintaining the occupation and preventing the Sahrawi people's free self-determination thereby preventing any chance of the territory becoming independent, and secondly the economic objective of

25 For instance, in the context of the war of decolonization that pitted the Algerian guerrilla against the State of France in the 1950s and 1960s, Naomi Klein (2012: 171) indicates that "many Algerians became impatient with the French liberals who expressed their indignation at the news that their soldiers were electrocuting and drowning those who were fighting for liberation and yet did nothing to put an end to the occupation that was the reason behind those abuses".

obtaining profits through the exploitation of natural resources and trade in goods produced in the area, such as the goods we have mentioned[26].

Civil and political rights

Without any discrimination due to their age, from the time they are girls until they are elderly, women in Western Sahara have faced violence perpetrated by the State of Morocco in different forms: abduction, enforced disappearance, arbitrary detention, imprisonment, torture, sexual violence, threats, persecution, intimidation, harassment, forced entry and searches, beatings, restrictions in their freedom of movement, association, expression and assembly... This violence has been perpetrated in different places, above all in military barracks and police stations, jails and secret detention centres, on the streets, and in the women's very homes.

Arbitrary detention, enforced disappearance and torture

As has been broadly documented in the piece of research The Oasis of Memory *(El oasis de la memoria,* Martín Beristain and González Hidalgo, 2012), enforced disappearance in Western Sahara has come in two major forms. One involves disappearances that become arbitrary detention and/or legal prosecution. The other involves detentions aiming to make the victim disappear with no safeguard, information or knowledge as to her lot or whereabouts.

Many of the women interviewed in this study were direct victims of enforced disappearance in secret detention centres for varying lengths of time, from

26 In this respect, it is necessary to recall the responsibilities of Spain. Since Morocco first occupied the territory, successive Spanish governments, irrespectively of their ideology, have remained undaunted by the human rights violations taking place in Western Sahara. Rather, concern about constantly maintaining and improving relations with Morocco continue to stand as one of the main pillars in Spain's foreign policy. First, several types of coercion exercised by Morocco over Spain can ben identified, and consist basically of: a) the historical claim to the cities of Ceuta and Melilla; b) control over the border and persons coming from the Maghreb and Sub-Saharan Africa attempting to enter Spain; and c) the role attributed to Morocco in controlling the so-called "Islamic terrorism" threat, making that State a permanent ally of Western powers. Second, another factor explaining the complicity between Spain and Morocco is the economic and trade agendas of both countries both regarding the exploiting of natural resources in Western Sahara and Spain's business in the sale of arms (*Centro de Investigación Delás*, 2010).

a few months to several years. In certain cases they were even disappeared more than once.

All of the women suffered torture during that time that they themselves recount in detail. They were kicked over their entire bodies and beaten on the head until they lost consciousness. Electrical shocks were applied to them on their feet and in their ears, their fingernails were pulled out, their heads were repeatedly submerged in water until they reached the threshold of drowning…

> *"One of the types of torture is that they tie us to a very narrow table and once you're bound they remove the chair. You feel like you're falling but you don't. I still have problems in my back and neck from that. They beat your feet until you bleed. When you come unconscious, they pour very cold water over you. Other times they hang you upside down from a pole…".*

> *"[We suffered] Physical torture, humiliation, blindfolding, they didn't let you sleep, no food…".*

> *"I was detained in September 1980 at the phosphate port because I was working in Fost Bucraa. Back then I was a little chubby. Because they wanted to tie my hands together behind my back and they couldn't, the military man put his knee on my back and was able to tie me when something broke in my shoulder. They put me in a Land Rover, hurled me on the ground and stepped on me… They took me to the PCCMI (rapid intervention police post), they tortured me, they poured dirty brackish water on me, and beat my feet until I came unconscious. Later they let me go and pulled my hair until I realized what was happening. And when I became conscious again, they repeated the same thing. Later on in the cell… Until I was half dead…".*

Physical torture in the Moroccan detention centres triggered the death of dozens of detainees including women. In other cases, death was perceived to be close. The following testimony bears witness to an extreme situation experienced in a context of on-going torture, on this occasion for nearly 20 days straight.

> *"After some time went by, they took me down from the table and dragged me down the stairs by my hair. From time to time they would pour cold water over me… On the third day I didn't even have the*

strength to get up. Two of them lifted me and the other slapped my face. Because I didn't want to talk he said 'If you don't want to talk, we're going to kill you'. I said: 'Count to 10 and if I don't talk, shoot'. He counted to 10, knocked over the seat and I fell on the floor. 'Do you want to die?' 'Yes, I want to die', I told him. 'You're going to die, but not now', he answered. 'We're going to cut you up piece by piece'. They put my head in a well of water, once and again. They hung me from my hands for 12 hours. On the fourth day they came and connected a wire to my ear and poured water on the ground. I had my whole body fibrillating. In the afternoon, they did the same thing with the wire in my finger. On the seventh day, they pulled out all of my nails… After 18 days I lost consciousness completely".

Another dimension of the detained/disappeared women's torture is the forced labour some of them were subjected to while they were in jail. Several were forced to do domestic labour to the extent of extenuation:

"In 1985 [in prison as a disappeared person], they began to bring in flour in huge sacks and left two of us women and we had to grind the 50 kg sacks every day from four in the morning until eight at night… It was very tiring, it was unbearable…".

Physical torture is inseparable from psychological torture since its aim is to subjugate, nullify and dehumanize the person being tortured. The women also narrated types of psychological torture that had a specific impact. For instance, for several of them, it was particularly traumatic to before forced to hear or watch while others were being tortured. In other words, in addition to experiencing their own torture, they were forced to watch extreme pain being inflicted on people with whom they have family, friendship or political solidary ties.

"You hear other people that are being tortured. They make you walk over tortured, bloody bodies… It's more than you can take as a young woman. That last thing, stepping on the bodies of other people who were tortured, had a terrible influence on me".

"I was abducted with my mate. They took her away from eight in the morning until the same time at night. 12 hours. I was hearing the screams (…). They brought her in wrapped in a blanket. She didn't move anything at all...".

> *"They put you near people that they're torturing, and you think it's better if they do it to you…".*

One of the aspects these women highlight is that many of them were detained and disappeared together with their daughters and sons. In these cases, the torture was not only inflicted on them but also on the minors, thereby multiplying the suffering.

> *"It really hurt me because I was listening to everybody's screams… even my son's… I would have preferred to die rather than hear those screams. My son was tortured to death. I heard all of his torturing, his suffering reached me through my ears until he died... After several days he died"*[27].

> *"The first time they disappeared me with my mother in 1980. She was a major organizer. The second time they disappeared us was in 1983, also with my mother".*

> *"[In 1975], when I was five and a half years old, they took away my whole family, grandparents and uncles included, and they burnt our haima tents. They imprisoned me with my grandmother. (…) In the two and a half years we were there, my grandmother was savagely tortured so that she would give information about my father, grandparents, uncles, and the Polisario Front. She didn't give information… I told my grandmother to tell them what they were asking so that we could go to the* haima tent *quickly… They burned my leg and belly with an iron bar, I still have the scar".*

Another pattern of violence that emerges from the testimonies is that during the time they were detained without giving any information about their family members, constant transfers to different detention centres were common.

27 This testimony from Salka Ayach appears in the report The Oasis of Memory (El Oasis de la memoria, 2012, Volume I: 363).

> *"I was abducted in 1984 and went through several prisons while I was disappeared: the rapid intervention police post [PCCMI] in Laayoune, Casa Blanca, Agdez, Kaalat Maguna…"*[28].

Among the causes for the transfers are the Moroccan regime's alleged security reasons, such as attempting to conceal these events from international observers on their visits, curtailing the risk of prisoners' escaping and ensuring greater efficacy in vigilance, and isolation of those imprisoned. Also, throughout the world, policies of dispersion in prison owe to objectives of disorientating and breaking ties with the prisoners' origins and, in the final instance, erasing male and female prisoners alike, as well as thwarting any efforts made by family members and support groups to seek, denounce and accompany.

Sexual violence

It is hard to accurately calculate the impact of sexual violence during armed conflict and politically violent situations. The reasons behind the difficulties in making an estimate and the lack of proper records of sexual seem common to all countries.

For one, the historical tendency to normalize sexual violence against women as inevitable collateral damage occurring during wars has prevented systematic fact gathering mechanisms from being developed over this crime. The issue has not been considered worthy of analysis or specific responses in terms of protection, care and reparation of victims. The result is that until very recent years sexual violence, which although it affects both males and females continues to be perpetrated more against women, has remained outside international consensus on crimes constituting war crimes, crimes against humanity or genocide.

28 Several places in both Morocco and Western Sahara functioned as secret detention centres, and transfers of detained/disappeared Sahrawis from one to the other was common. Some of these centres were: Kalaat Maguna, the Agadir and Agdez police stations, the command posts of the Mobile Intervention Companies (PCCMI), the Casablanca police station known as Derb Moulay Chérif, the gendarmerie barracks in Smara and Tan Tan, the civil prison in Kenitra, the Black Prison (*Cárcel Negra*) in Laayoune, the Rapid Intervention Batallion (*Bataillon D'intervention Rapide*-BIR), among others. For details on each, the computer graphics on Western Sahara can be consulted on the Hegoa Institute website: <www.hegoa.ehu.eus>.

In addition stands the host of difficulties generally faced by the women themselves in giving testimony, involving fear of the repercussions it could have on their physical integrity (retaliation)[29] and of their social inclusion (being considered guilty, being singled out, ostracized…). To all of this one must add that, in the light of experience over history, women have very scant chances of obtaining justice, if at all. Sexual violence is therefore the human rights violation that is perpetrated with the greatest degree of impunity throughout the world.

In Western Sahara, when attempting to ascertain the scope of the sexual violence perpetrated during the conflict and occupation, we find these same difficulties. First, there are not systematic mechanisms to gather facts and secondly, most of those who survive the violence choose to remain silent. The issue is very difficult to address due to the strong personal family, social and cultural implications it has, meaning that first and foremost accompaniment and a great deal of care must be provided for the women survivors who are able to shed any glimmer of shame or feelings of guilt.

For the Sahrawi women interviewed in this study, it was important to tackle this issue based on action carried out by women in other countries to denounce sexual crimes committed against them. For instance in Guatemala, feminist and human rights organizations have documented the sexual violence against women during the armed conflict and have recently been able to have some of those responsible brought before justice and convicted[30]. Also, feminist organizations in Colombia have documented nearly 1000 cases of women who have faced different types of violence, including sexual violence, during the armed conflict that is still ensuing there.

29 In Guatemala, for instance, the fact that the perpetrators often remain in the same communities or live near the women surviving the sexual violence makes it difficult for these women to step forward and denounce them (ECAP and UNAMG, 2009). Of course where armed conflict continues, such as in Colombia, the difficulties for women are even greater. "The chances of denouncing sexual violence in the country's internal armed conflict are definitively determined by the potential victims' lack of protection in the face of armed actors who exercise either political, economic or military control over the territory" (Sisma Mujer, n/d: 8).

30 In March 2016, a Guatemala court sentenced a colonel and military commissioner from the Sepur Zarco detachment, charged with sexual violence and sexual and domestic slavery against eleven q'eqchi women, the killing of three women (a woman and her two daughters), and the enforced disappearance of seven men (the husbands of the surviving women) to more than one hundred years in prison.

Knowledge of these experiences not only stirred up interest and solidarity among Sahrawi activists, but also a variety of appraisals of their difficulties in speaking about their own cases:

> *"There are also [rapes] here and we don't talk about them out of fear. The silence is because they think that they will be held responsible. It's important to see how we can make this visible here, in our history, and for it not to be forgotten. And also technically how to document it and do it properly".*

> *"Here we can't talk about sexual violence. We can't talk about ourselves or this type of thing because of our religion and culture".*

Like in other countries, in Western Sahara women have been and continue to be subject to sexual violence due to their gender, their cultural and national identity, and also their political activism. As Segura explains (1998: 8-9), active participation in armed, political, union, community, religious or other organizations involves for women "a broadening out of the types of exposure to direct violence (similar to that of men) coupled with gender related types of exposure (and particularly sexual violence as a specific mode of aggression) which remain". Furthermore, on many occasions, both types of violence are perpetrated in the same context, that is, sexual violence occurs as a form of torture and/or precedes a killing.

Sahrawi women are aware of the sexual violence against them also being used to spread terror among all women to get them to desist in their participation or not dare to begin. By punishing the bodies of some women, the attempt is to spread terror throughout the collective body of them all.

> *"Through rape they try to crush women, weaken them".*

Generally speaking, sexual violence is present between the lines but not specifically recounted in the testimonies. We consider that no closed interpretations should be made of this, although we point out here several possible explanations.

First, there is a degree of self-censorship in women out of fear, shame, fear of being blamed, potential damage to their self-esteem or to their family and social image and status. Added to this, during the current occupation, given that their expectations of obtaining justice or reparation are limited,

these women may feel that speaking openly about what happened perhaps does not pay in terms of the individual and social cost that denouncing often implies.

In order to explain this, we believe it is important to stress the social perception of sexual violence functions a factor behind women's difficulty in denouncing this violation of their rights. This perception is characterized by several aspects including the minimizing of the crime as compared to others (particularly when it does not lead to the victim's death), the social stigma it bears in terms of "dishonour" for the women themselves and more broadly their families and social groups (which usually triggers dismembering of the family and/or community), and the intergenerational conveying of dishonour, which seems to be automatically carried from the surviving mothers to their sons and daughters. Overall, these conditioning factors are highly present in the women's lives. Therefore, not only they but also many times their own families and surrounding environments prefer concealing.

Secondly, it is important to remember that silence is not always explained by fear, but may also owe to the person's own negotiation between memory and silence – which is not tantamount to forgetting. It is a type of resort to resilience and to preventing the pain attached to remembering something so traumatic.

In other cases, the silence is the fruit of some women's personal conviction that they must bear the cost of their activism:

> *"I keep the consequences of what happened to myself, so that what happened doesn't have an influence on the road ahead and the drive to continue".*

Despite this set of conditioning factors, in the documents analysed and the interviews done for this research, explicit references were found to several forms of sexual violence.

While we were unable to obtain information about the sexual violence perpetrated by the Spanish occupation forces, it can be observed that the Moroccan military occupation of Western Sahara in 1975 was done with a great deal of violence against the Sahrawi population which was specifically sexist against women:

> *"They stared to detain us, hit us, and sexually abuse the women. Ten of them took turns with a single woman until they left her literally dead"*[31].

Over the first few years of the occupation, a report by the Sahrawi Red Crescent (1976) alluded to sexual violence in these terms: "Some jeeps reach the foot of Alminar. The officials occupying it point to the young women which the soldiers rushed over to in order to take them to the officials' barracks".

In the testimonies gathered for this study, several references were made to forcing women of different ages, over different periods of time, to stand naked during detention or while abducted, and also systematically during torture. The experiences they describe of this type of sexual violence point towards feelings of humiliation, vulnerability and a deep affront to their personal dignity[32]:

> *"The stripped my grandmother naked in front of everyone".*

> *"People couldn't believe such harm could be done among Muslims. For instance, when I tell people that they stripped me naked, people say 'that can't be''*[33].

In addition, one practice by the Moroccan security forces associated with forced nakedness is photographing these women, thereby increasing their humiliation as well as the pressure brought to bear so they do not denounce their treatment.

> *"Then the took out a camera to take pictures, they took pictures of me naked, I am not wearing anything… This is what kills me: they take pictures of me naked, I'm not wearing anything, my whole body comes out naked…".*

Rape is a constant during detention and imprisonment alike, and is particularly vicious in the case of women.

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31 This testimony of a woman fleeing from the Moroccan entry into the territory appears in the documentary The Problem. Testimony of the Sahrawi People (*El problema. Testimonio del pueblo saharaui*) directed by Jordi Ferrer and Pablo Vidal (2010).

32 Reference was also made to the forcing men to remain naked during their imprisonment.

33 El Ghalia Djimi, testimony included in the report The Oasis of Memory (*El oasis de la memoria*, 2012).

> *"Brutal rape is committed against both men and women. Women are savagely abused of endlessly in the prisons of Maguna, Agdez and the PCCMI… where women are raped in the most cruel and humiliating manner, using plastic tubes, metal bars, glass bottles or loaves of dry bread. Things that are unimaginable and unconceivable for human conscience. This is a dishonour for the Sahrawis"*[34].

The repression of demonstrations and protests as of the decade of the 2000s also included sexual violence against women. During the 2005 Intifada for instance, rapes were denounced during the looting of homes. Moroccan civilians were included among those responsible.

> *"The 'Sahrawi hunt', began and was to be repeated on the 24th and 25th of may with a shattering outcome. The settlers broke into at least thirteen houses and looted them. Many young women were raped. A young women who was holding the Sahrawi flag during the sit-in was also raped"*[35].

While there are very few direct testimonies of sexual violence against Sahrawi women, we would like to highlight that of the young woman Hayat Erguibi, who filed a complaint the day after she was abducted by the Moroccan police on 22 February 2009 when she was 19 years old[36]. She was under surveillance, followed, and detained by the Moroccan police on her way to private classes and hurled into a car.

> *"What I suffered from is very painful, they came and they stripped me naked, they didn't leave anything on me, absolutely nothing, they removed all of my clothing, I remained naked, completely naked, even the sensitive parts of my body, and they starting putting theirs here [she points near her mouth]… I don't dare say the name… Then they started to kiss me, and have sex with me, the truth is that they did many things that I don't dare mention, things I can't even say to*

34 Aminatou Haidar, testimony included in the documentary The Problem. Testimony of the Sahrawi People (*El problema. Testimonio del pueblo saharaui*) directed by Jordi Ferrer and Pablo Vidal (2010).

35 Haidar (2008: 59). As we have mentioned, cases of sexual violence against men have been also denounced in Western Sahara, usually occurred during arbitrary detention and abduction. Denouncements have referred to forced nakedness and rape using objects such as glass bottles.

36 In addition to a legal complaint and publically denouncing this over the internet, her case was reported by the World Organization Against Torture (2009).

myself, when I'm alone… They started to touch me in places… places in my body that I don't dare mention, they practiced with me, kisses … and it comes from here [she points to the nape of her neck], then here, and they tell me… they tell me… there are a lot of things I can't say, a lot of things it's no good for me to say… their breath smells of alcohol… What can I say…?".

It was also common for the Moroccan security forces to threaten Sahrawi women with sexual violence and death if they denounced their treatment, as occurred with Hayar Erguibi:

"They threatened me so that I wouldn't say anything, saying that if I said anything about that they would rape me again, but worse the next time, that this time they would touch my honour, that's a lot…, yesterday they stuck their truncheons in my backside, that's a lot… Just because we're Sahrawis, this happens to me and the other girls, this is a lot, more than anyone can bear. With their truncheons they hit me and did that other thing, they did things that I don't accept for my personality (…) They swore to me that if I presented any testimony, I would be raped worse this time, and then they'll bury me in a place no one would know, and 'no one will remember you. And they brought the acid, they tried to through it onto my feet… I was so afraid I couldn't stand it anymore, I felt like I was going to die, that there was nothing left between me and my death, I was almost dying…"

Restriction of the right to assembly, freedom of expression, demonstration and circulation

In the testimonies of the women interviewed, there are paradigmatic landmarks where the right to assembly, expression, demonstration, and circulation are violated. Among the milestones are Morocco's building at the beginning of the 1980s of a military wall more than 2,700 kilometres long dividing the population into occupied and free areas, and also the Tindouf camps, the repression to prevent demonstrations at the 1987 United Nations delegation visit and that of the Organization for African Unity, and more recently, the violent dismantling of the Gdeim Izik camp in 2010.

While these examples refer to times when human rights violations had a massive impact and breadth, examples of violence in everyday life abound much more.

In recent years, thanks to the clandestine audio-visuals, forms of harassment, intimidation and ill treatment of women who decide to demonstrate and publicly protest can actually be observed. Round-ups, insults, threats and beatings are the norm.

The violation of the right to demonstrate and of freedom of expression also affects Sahrawi women who are outside the occupied territory due to Morocco's retaliation against their families. One example is Tabkar Haddi's mother and sister, who were beaten by the policy in Laayoune as retaliation for her decision to begin a hunger strike. To this day, both of them remain under surveillance and are harassed in their own home.

> *"When I announced [in 2015] that I was going to begin a hunger strike in front of the Moroccan embassy in Gran Canaria, my family and others began to disseminate the news in Laayoune. Then the Moroccan military secret police went over [to the family's home] to beat my mother and sister".*

Sahrawi efforts to inform via social media about the situation in the area receive the same violent, restrictive retaliation from the Moroccan authorities. Organizations such as Equipe Media are constantly being harassed, and internet sites related to the vindications of the Sahrawi cause have been blocked (Oskoz and Chacón, 2008).

In addition, exercising the right to organization and assembly is severely curtailed in the occupied territories. The obstacles in legally establishing Sahrawi organizations are constant, particularly when it comes to those focusing on defending human rights, natural resources, or self-determination. Many of these associations, although they do not recognize Morocco as a legitimate government, have met the administrative and political requirements to request legal entity as civil associations. Despite this, Morocco has most often refused to legalize these associations and forced them to continue their work underground without the most minimal security conditions.

For instance, it was not until July 2015 that the ASVDH was granted its status as a legal entity. It had been working towards this recognition since 2005. According to the ASVDH, the road has been peppered with hurdles ranging from limitations in registration to naming the association as desired to on-going retaliations against its members.

> *"Although the ASVDH has never participated in any illegal activity, the Moroccan authorities have always had the Executive Committee and the Coordinating Board as their target, and have arrested, beaten and ill-treated their members, subjecting them to widespread arrests, merely because they belong to the ASVDH"*[37].

Furthermore, there have been cases where Morocco has dissolved legally constituted organizations with the argument that they were "conspiring" with institutions and organizations that were hostile to Morocco, as occurred in 2003 with the *Foro Verdad y Justicia del Sáhara Occidental* (Western Sahara Truth and Justice Forum) (Oskoz and Chacón, 2008).

Associated with the violations of the right to freedom of association and expression, women have also had their right to free circulation curtailed. For instance, often the Moroccan police prevent women from entering meeting places. Another constant violation of their rights is the denial of permits to leave the territory, particularly for women activists who attend international events related to defending human rights or similar activities involving solidarity, training and awareness raising.

> *"In 2009, Oxford University did a research project on Palestine and Sahara and they didn't let me and 5 other young people leave to go to London, they told us no".*

> *"They detained me when I got to the airport in Casablanca in 2010 and they took me to the Gendarmerie".*

Recently, the Vice President of the ASVDH, El Ghalia Djimi, who was scheduled to participate at the 31st Session of the Human Rights Council in Geneva in March 2016, was refused an exit permit. This was denounced by Djimi herself as well as a Sahrawi delegation made up of members from the Tindouf camps, the Diaspora, and the Polisario Front delegation based in Switzerland.

Lastly, another type of violation of the human rights mentioned is the denial of entry and expelling from the territory of diplomatic, political,

37 For further information see the ASVDH website: <www.asvdh.net/sobre-asvdh>.

academic, human rights and international solidarity delegations[38]. Morocco continues to reserve the right to admit foreigners in a territory that is not its own, and does so arbitrarily and unpredictably. Difficulties in entering the area and gaining first hand knowledge about the situation, particularly the human rights situation, is in and of itself indicative of the severity of the circumstances and the extent to which the Moroccan authorities wish to maintain an information blackout on Western Sahara.

The restricted access of foreigners has its counterpoint in the efforts made by women to denounce the situation as part of the violation of their civil and political rights.

Economic, social and cultural rights

Human rights violations in Western Sahara do not only affect women's civil and political rights, and most gravely their right to life and to their physical integrity. They affect all spheres of their lives. The following describes how women are affected by the violation of economic, social and cultural rights.

Here it is important to mention the responsibility that Moroccan government officials have in the Western Sahara education and health systems. As we will see, women's social and political work leads some of their employers and particularly the government to retaliate. In addition, many teachers act as informants or squealers on Sahrawi students if they consider their attitudes or behaviour to in any way defy Moroccan sovereignty over their territory. In the field of health, the testimonies point toward a severe lack of medical care. At times, the negligence of the health care professionals is intended while other times "the police contact the health centres directly and prohibit them from issuing medical certificates accrediting occurrences.

38 To cite only a few examples, in 2006, a diplomatic delegation from Norway, Sweden and Finland was denied entry (Libertad digital, 2006). In 2014 the same occurred with a delegation from the Basque Network to Support Sahrawi Women (*Red Vasca de Apoyo a las Mujeres Saharauis*), including representation from the Ondarroa town council. Later, in July 2015, two people from the Hegoa Institute in charge of this research, together with a representative of the Getxo town council were also prevented from entering Laayoune. In addition, in September 2015 two representatives from the Aragonese Observatory on Western Sahara (*Observatorio Aragonés para el Sáhara Occidental*), one of which was photojournalist Gervasio Sánchez, were also denied entry (Europa Press, 2015). On other occasions, the Moroccan authorities have expelled delegations already present in the occupied territories.

On occasions they have even prevented staff from performing their duties and caring for victims of torture and ill treatment" (Oskoz and Chacón, 2008: 47)[39].

Economic and labour exclusion

As part of its occupation policy, Morocco maintains a strategy of discriminating against the Sahrawis in both economic and labour terms in order to keep them unemployed and in poverty. By attacking a vital dimension of human existence, that is access to and control over their means of subsistence, the State of Morocco, aims to undermine the Sahrawis ability to shape and sustain their resistance to the occupation. In other words, subjecting Sahrawi men and women to precarious material conditions hampers any potential manifestation of their political dissidence.

Social and economic marginalization of the Sahrawis does not only occur in the occupied territories, but also seems to be a historical characteristic of cities in southern Morocco where Sahrawis live in certain numbers. This seems to point toward a persistent, widespread characteristic of this Moroccan exclusion policy.

> *"Morocco's behaviour towards Sahrawis does not begin in the 1970s because since the 1940s and 1950s, we Sahrawis have been second class citizens. For instance Agadir is a touristic city. It's pretty, but the neighbourhoods where Sahrawis live are the most marginalized. They lack water, electricity, they have shacks. I feel the State of Morocco does not like those people"*[40].

If we specifically observe the situation of Sahrawi women, certain sources indicate that they "live in poverty, illiteracy, and most of them do not have employment" (Omar *et al*., 2008: 24). First of all, we must make mention of the fact that the division of labour by gender tends to confine most women to doing housework and caring for children and

39 One example is Sultana Haya who, when participating in a student demonstration in the city of Marrakech, was beaten by the Moroccan police until her right eye burst. Sultana Haya denounced the fact that, even in that state, instead of immediately transferring her to the hospital, she was taken to the police station to be interrogated and that, once in the hospital, the police had ordered doctors to do no more than "stitch her eyelid".

40 El Ghalia Djimi, testimony included in the report The Oasis of Memory (*El oasis de la memoria*, 2012).

leaves remunerated job opportunities and to the men. This is one of the reasons that, throughout the world and also in Western Sahara, explain the feminization of poverty.

In the second place, there are several elements of Morocco's policy of excluding and marginalizing the Sahrawis that aggravate the situation of women.

For instance, one of the aspects mentioned by those who currently are not working, and particularly by educated young women, is the political constraints impacting a potential career.

> *"I have a degree in law from a Moroccan university but Morocco forces me to declare my allegiance to the regime in order to practice. And I have not done that".*

This conditioning factor assumes that for Sahrawi women with higher education, refusing to take this allegiance will pose a *de facto* barrier to being able to practice in the occupied territories. And this situation entails very serious economic consequences for them and their families. Moreover, when the job they are being prevented from performing is legal counsel, the aim here is to prevent the Sahrawi people from availing themselves of strategic resources to defend their rights. In other words, the significant human and material effort that the families have made to promote their children's education and training cannot benefit these families or their community.

The women who do hold jobs often see their labour rights violated, including the right to health coverage. Furthermore, they also denounce harassment at work by their superiors by thwarting their career development and promotion on the job and also in refusals to grant them permits to leave the country or to take vacation time off. This especially impacts women singled out due to their activism, such as El Ghalia Djimi.

> *"I mean that I have no task to do in my job. Absolutely none. I have to go to work every day, sign my entry and exit, but without doing anything. It is a decision taken against me, so that I cannot improve my skills in agriculture, and to leave me in an undignified position, like a slave you might say. And when I want to get out and defend my principles, my cause, they don't want to let me out or travel".*

Another one of the economic strategies that has been used in Morocco to punish Sahrawi women's militancy is the withdrawing their National Promotion Card (*Carte de Promotion Nationale*), entitling them to social benefits or monthly aid[41]. For instance, the activist in Laayoune Mahfouda Lefkir, who suffered several abuses against her and her family (physical violence, intimidation, threats to rape both her and her 11 year old daughter, etc.), denounced in May 2014 that the Moroccan authorities tried to dissuade her from participating in the protests and by withdrawing her social security payment (of approximately 95 euros) at the end of the month without any explanation (Allan and Lkhal, 2015).

Police officers photograph and record Sahrawi protests and demonstrations to later identify those attending and retaliate against them, for instance by taking away their mentioned *Carte de Promotion Nationale* or, as in the case of women working for the Moroccan administration, freezing their salaries or laying them off. While covering their faces with their *melhfa*[42] is a way to protect their identity, the situation is very touchy for them due to their degree of exposure because of their participation.

> *"They've had my card frozen now for four months because I participated in a demonstration and received prisoners who were released from prison".*

These dissuasive measures seem to be having contrary effects on women. On the one hard, the risk of loosing their benefits or salary or job if they are seen in demonstrations or receiving prisoners or any in other activity running against Morocco's occupation sometimes does indeed inhibit them from participating, particularly those who are in the most vulnerable positions economically speaking, and with dependent family members.

Yet on the other hand, the fact that they are less included in the job market and in worse conditions than men ends up being a reason not to give in to Morocco's pressure. In other words, because they are in a more precarious economic and labour predicament, some women perceive they have less to loose.

41 Journalist Olivier Quarante (2014: 7) indicates "Several statements gathered in the place support the idea that when it comes to the Sahrawis, this grant enables them to buy social peace and regulate political agitation by distributing money through tribal chiefs. The authorities may even discontinue aid to a person just for having been seen at a pro-Sahrawi demonstration".

42 Traditional Sahrawi women's dress. Men's traditional dress is known as the *darrá*.

"The Moroccans manage all of the financial sources. Most of those who work are men and they can't become as involved. Women aren't afraid to loose jobs they don't have. What's more, it's easier to relinquish a woman's salary. Our salaries range from between 75 and 100 euros a month, while men earn between 140 and 150 euros".

Discrimination and violence in school

Sahrawi's education has been heavily based on oral tradition "conveyed through stories, poetry and daily conversations on history, religion and cultural values", or through "traditional education" normally facilitated by a man who masters the Arabic language (reading, grammar and poetry) and the Koran, and takes place in a *frig* or group of *haima* tents (Randa, 2011: 34).

During Spanish colonization, schools were built late and came as a response to colonizers who were drawn by phosphate extraction industry in the 1960s. While at the beginning of that decade there were six primary schools with 366 students, over the following years the number of schools and students increased, and in 1974 stood at 4,862 primary school students, 911 secondary school students, and 38 university students (García, 2010: 30).

This growth in the colonial school system, however, was highly asymmetrical. In schools where the language of instruction was Spanish, there were virtually no Sahrawi teachers at all and no mention was made in the *curriculum* to anything related to Sahrawi society. During that period, very few Sahrawis could access school. Some participated in informal learning groups known as *al-katateeb* in mosques where they acquired a basic knowledge of their language and religion. According to García (ibid.: 35), in 1974, 30 per cent fewer Sahrawis studied than Spaniards, and 85% of Sahrawis were illiterate.

Among those who went to school during the years of Spanish colonization there were more Sahrawi men than women. As a result, the illiteracy rate was even higher among women and very few were able to learn Spanish. Overall these two factors together have impacted negatively the educational and career chances of many of the Sahrawi women who are adults today, and even the scope of their activism and political leadership both locally and internationally.

As occurs in the economic sphere, it is difficult to obtain detailed information about the educational system in Western Sahara after the occupation, at least disaggregated from the general information about Morocco, and even more difficult to get disaggregated regarding women there.

According to a report by a non-governmental organization working with refugees, CEAR-Madrid (2015), "within the part of the territory controlled by Morocco, education is free of charge and mandatory between the ages of six and 15. While the illiteracy rate in the region is 56.4%, there are major gaps according to gender and location. Often, girls in rural areas do not attend school and if they do, they often do not finish, so that the illiteracy rate for women in rural areas is 90%" (García Fachal, 2015: 7).

In the context of conflict with Morocco, the Sahrawi people have attached a high value to education because of its potential in maintaining collective identity, a feeling of belonging and a spirit of vindication. Likewise though conversely, for Morocco, both the educational centres and the very school *curriculum* stand as a means to acculturate or assimilate Sahrawis.

As a result, in the experience of the women interviewed, educational centres have been places where they have received a great deal of hostility since they were girls. Discriminatory and violent practices are common, ranging from temporary or even definitive expelling to direct aggression by the police, often times present in schools.

The Moroccan teachers often work with the police and facilitate information and denounce Sahrawi students who openly express their political, social and national vindications. Some of the women denounced changing grades on papers or exams to harm records of their school performance as just a small part of the litany of retaliation for identifying themselves as Sahrawis with an opinion on their own.

> *"When I was in my first year of secondary school, the teacher treated me very badly, discriminated against me, and I left school even though I was good at maths".*
>
> *"In the pre-university course, Sahrawis would always fail. They would only pass five or six per city. All with the objective of the Sahrawi people not becoming emancipated or developing culturally"*[43].

43 Sultana Haya, testimony included in The Problem. Testimony of the Sahrawi People (*El problema. Testimonio del pueblo saharaui*) directed by Jordi Ferrer and Pablo Vidal (2010).

> *"I remember that in 1988, in Laayoune they forced about 6000 young Sahrawi students to drop out of school in order to take them to the Ministry of the Interior of Morocco. It was a generation that liked to study a lot and had a lot of hopes about their careers in science. The exporting of youth was to eliminate Sahrawi culture and force their integration into another culture that is not their own. Morocco said it was going to provide work, and that it was better to work than to continue studying…I decided not to go, and that's why I was forced to leave my studies"*[44].

In a context of military occupation and experiencing discrimination at school first hand, school was an important initiation into political activism for Sahrawi women. Their involvement in the Sahrawi resistance came at an early age, as did the consequences.

> *"At school, a Moroccan teacher would always be touching me, my clothes and everywhere. I felt like throwing an egg at him but I couldn't, so I threw a picture of the King at him…They called us in to the principal's office and called the police. The boys were really afraid. I decided to take responsibility from the beginning. I knew my mother would understand me, I wouldn't have any problems in telling her about it. The police took me away in a van… Then they expelled me from school for 20 days. That's where [my participation] began, until today".*

Sahrawi students' experience in Moroccan centres of education, basically at University, non-existent in the occupied territories, or in language schools, is not very different than what they experienced in the occupied territories. As they denounce, they experienced a litany of *"provocations, harassment, detentions and pressure"* from the Moroccan authorities.

Negation of cultural identity

Among the objectives in Morocco's strategy to control both the territory and the population in Western Sahara, consists of boiling down what sets Sahrawis apart from the rest to a bare minimum, if not eliminating it altogether. Most

44 This testimony alludes to Morocco's programme known as "Hassan II's cubs", where thousands of young Sahrawis were coerced into leaving for different cities in Morocco in order to be "diluted" there and to diminish their resistance in the occupied territories (Martín Beristain, 2013).

directly and visibly, since the occupation, the authorities have violently repressed any type of Sahrawi cultural expression or expression of identity, be it their language, dress, nomadic tradition, symbols or what have you.

> "*They want to take everything away from us, even our language. They teach the children Amazigui, the dialect of northern Morocco*".

Coupled with this, since the beginning of the occupation, the regime has implemented silent measures yet likewise geared towards 'Moroccanizing' the territory. The Green March itself, where 350 thousand Moroccans including civilians and members of the military were transferred to Western Sahara, met the objective of altering the area's demographic balance and cultural identity.

Since the Green March, over several decades Morocco has sustained a policy of incentives for establishing new colonizers, and has fostered their settlement there by building new homes and offering jobs. This strategy has had a major impact on the social and demographic characteristics in the area, generating a situation in which the Sahrawi population has become a minority in the occupied territories. Their presence there has become confined to certain areas and neighbourhoods in the cities. According to current figures, of the 530,000 inhabitants of the occupied territories, 180,000 (more than 33%) are members of the Moroccan military, 245,000 are Moroccan colonizers and 105,000 are Sahrawis (approximately 20%) (Hegoa and Aranzadi, 2014)[45].

The issue of identity is particularly sensitive for women who, as we have seen earlier regarding the FAFESA, take the defence of Sahrawi culture and ensuring that it is conveyed to younger generations as part of their several core actions.

Over recent years, some women have observed attempts by the Moroccan regime to show a more tolerant face towards Sahrawi culture, although they are nevertheless resentful and critical of it:

> *"Not long ago, the regime was trying, as a sort of reconciliation with the Sahrawi people, to organize forums, exhibits in order to, as they*

45 According to the same source, in the territories liberated and under Polisario Front control, there are an estimated 49,000 inhabitants, and 116,000 in the refugee camps. In addition, the Sahrawi Diaspora, settled mainly in Europe and mostly in Spain, comprises 50.000 people.

> *were saying, highlight the value of Sahrawi culture and heritage. But this initiative is uncertain because it's a mystified culture. In this context, the authorities control pseudo-intellectuals they pay from Majzen and try to construct a sort of folklore that damages the very essence and value of hassaniyya culture and heritage"*[46].

In the face of this negation or 'folklorization', women persist in their goal to maintain the Sahrawi community's knowledge, culture and heritage. Furthermore, they establish a clear link between the recent Moroccan revaluation of Sahrawi culture and its goal to conceal human rights violations.

> *"This is the new manoeuvre orchestrated by the occupier to cover up crimes and violations of Sahrawi's human rights"*[47].

In her report to the United Nations Human Rights Council on her mission to Morocco in September 2011, the Independent Expert in the field of cultural rights, Farida Shaheed, included a separate chapter on Western Sahara based on her visit to the city of Dakhla. Without even alluding to the political conflict as a conditioning factor in the situation, she raised various issues in her report that are indicative of the limitations that Sahrawis face in exercising their cultural rights.

First of all, regarding the educational system, the expert manifested her concern that "Sahrawis do not learn about their own culture and history, given that they are taught only the official history of Morocco" (para. 71), which is in breach of both the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the UNESCO Declaration on Cultural Diversity.

Secondly, the independent expert referred to "important obstacles to the enjoyment of the right to participate in the cultural life of Western Sahara. In particular, land mines jeopardize Sahrawis' traditional desert-linked nomadic lifestyle and prevent local communities from organizing their leisure activities" (para. 72). In addition to Morocco's lack of will to cooperate in demining the area, the military wall dividing Western Sahara in two poses the main obstacle to the Sahrawi's freedom of movement and perpetuates the separation of families, divided between the occupied area and the Tindouf refugee camps. Above all, the independent expert's report

46 Lakhlifi (2012: 313).

47 Ibid.

indicates that “Sahrawi families who have been divided face difficulties in transmitting their cultural traditions and values to their offspring” (para. 73).

Other issues of concern highlighted in the report include the fact that “some Sahrawis have stopped wearing their distinctive traditional dress or were hesitant to do so as they felt threatened or harassed by others” (para. 75), and that Sahrawis “do not always enjoy in practice the right to register their preferred name for their children, in particular, the Hassani practice of hyphenated names” (para. 77).

3. Impact of violence against sahrawi women

Psycho-social studies on political violence and its effects show an increase in the damage caused by such violence when it is the result of State-designed and directed policies. "Such violence transforms the context and uses all its institutions to create a generalized atmosphere of insecurity, terror, mistrust and social polarization. It takes place in a socio-political context of impunity, which heightens people's feeling of vulnerability and defencelessness and their fear of repeated violence. This situation not only indefinitely reproduces, but also deepens the damage caused, reaching all levels where victims are involved (economic, political and social) and all individual and collective, psychological and social planes" (Lira [1991] quoted in Paz Bailey, 2012: 87).

This is the situation in Western Sahara, where violence is part of the Moroccan government's policy. In this context, as we saw earlier, violence against Sahrawi women was and is common practice and its impacts are many and permanent. From the perspective of the *continuum* of political violence faced by Sahrawi women throughout the recent history or their people, we can state that the traumatic events they have experienced have a cumulative effect in terms of individual and collective damage.

Furthermore, on account of its constancy over time and the interdependence of psychological and social effects, this amounts to extreme traumatisation. It "surpasses subjects' mental structures and society's ability to respond adequately to this process. Its goal is the destruction of the individual, his or her interpersonal relations, his or her awareness of clan and his or her membership in society. Extreme traumatisation is a way to exercise power over society, in which socio-political structure is based on breaking down and exterminating some of the members of that same society" (Minoletti, 2005: 69).

As a result of gross human rights violations in Western Sahara, a large yet undetermined of Sahrawi women have lost their lives during the occupation, the bombings of civilian population, while fleeing across the desert, in prison and as a result of torture.

At the same time, the women who have survived show physical and psychological impacts that have affected and seriously deteriorated their health from the time the events took place to now. Women have also been affected in their personal, sexual, family and social lives, as well as economically, in employment, culturally and educationally.

Women often report having undergone more than one traumatic experience, either simultaneously or successively. This has also taken place in other contexts of conflict, such as in Colombia, where it was shown that each woman interviewed had experienced four to five human rights violations, and over 25% had endured over six (Ruta Pacífica de las Mujeres, 2013). This circumstance amounts to poly-traumatisation, in reference to "the effects generated by experiencing more than one traumatic event that is repressive in nature, which has specific effects on individual health and makes it difficult to determine which traumatic situation exerted the most intense influence" (Minoletti, 2005: 71).

Physical and psychological consequences

The effects of human rights violations on women's physical health are multiple. The women interviewed told of wounds, fractures and chronic pain in the head, neck, should, back, hand, etc. Physical violence left diverse, indelible marks on women's bodies, marks that speak for themselves as regards suffering.

One of the women interviewed, for example, carries from age six the mark of the red hot iron with which she was burned during her grandmother's arrest and imprisonment. The mark is a reflection of the reminders that are present on women's mistreated bodies, which in terms of impact are wounds not yet healed for the individual and for the community. It is also an example of the language of human violence that has been standardized to a certain extent, and is a symbol of impunity, inasmuch as there has been nor justice nor reparation.

When reflecting on their past and present experiences, the women also refer to the psychological impact. They refer recurrently to living in fear. As they say in their own words: *"Fear is always there"*.

Feelings of anxiety, concern and uncertainty were reported repeatedly. Women had them both as detainees and/or disappeared persons and as relatives of individuals in such circumstances. More precisely, constant anxiety is generated by thoughts regarding the torture and suffering most probably being experienced by their loved ones, concern and uncertainty while waiting for them to appear or be set free, and fear of never seeing them again. This situation remains active, of course, for those with relatives who are still disappeared or imprisoned. In all cases they manifest a feeling of profound sadness in relation to their experiences.

Women's testimonies also reveal other repercussions of fear, from recurrent negative thoughts to requiring medication:

> *"They arrested me at a checkpoint on the way to the airport. Every time I go through a checkpoint I relive that moment…".*

> *"In 1991 I met Zahra Bousaoula and the group of students that demonstrated at the elections that year. When she disappeared I fell into depression and was treated with medication".*

Despite the fact that women are aware that the Moroccan State holds direct responsibility for the human rights violations against them, feelings of guilt appear with some frequency when recalling situations of being under extreme pressure and that were not always able to avoid.

> *"In 1986 a Land Rover drove up with strong men, dressed as civilians. I didn't know who they were and they asked me over and over where the home of a relative was. I finally told them… They arrested two people, one them was my brother. I'll always feel guilty…".*

In other cases, guilt manifests itself as part of being powerless to be able to alleviate other people's suffering. This feeling cannot be explained other than by women's capacity for empathy and solidarity when faced with the pain of others:

> *"When I got out of prison many women asked me about their relatives; whether they were still alive, where they were… I didn't have much information. I felt guilty for not having more information and not knowing more people".*

Sexual violence: multiple impact

It is hard to provide direct testimony on the many effects –physical, psychological, social and family, and cultural– of sexual violence due to the discretion with which women deal with this matter.

Nonetheless, based on research done in other situations of armed conflict and political violence in which sexual violence against women has been denounced, we know that the effects are multiple and mostly permanent. Indeed, in cases not involving death, the impact on women's physical and mental health is so great as to be hardly able to be reversed.

From a medical standpoint, in addition to it being common for women to experience menstrual withdrawal or pain, they also experience "a variety of serious physical genital and non-genital lesions. Many women do not survive rape due to harsh brutality of the acts, or die later from a serious physical consequence, such as HIV infection" (Griese, 2012: 95). Physically, sexual violence can cause "bruising and tearing of the genitals, the bladder or the anus, and other lesions resulting from struggle or being beaten, fainting, etc. Extremely violent rapes, gang rapes or insertion of objects into the vagina can cause traumatic fistulas, leading to incontinence and severe pain and often, in the long term, to infertility" (ibid.).

Furthermore, we highlight that "a major risk of appearance of pre-cancerous and/or cervical carcinoma" has been observed "in women who have been raped, due to the poor hygiene of the perpetrators, transmission of the human papillomavirus (HPV), the high level of stress and weakening of women's immune systems" (ibid.: 96).

In Western Sahara, due to the lack of both walk-in and follow-up medical care for women who have suffered sexual violence, there are no reports on the type of lesions caused by this violence in the short or the long term.

Added to the effects are the psychological and social effects that make it hard for women to be able to testify about the facts and the consequences in their lives.

> *"If I were to show you what happened to me it would be unbearable… I can only tell you that we are in very bad shape, we cannot bear*

any more, they attack us at school, in our homes, they attack us for anything we do, we cannot bear it anymore, as young women or children this is happening to us. There are many things I cannot even talk about, because I feel ashamed of myself... I don't even dare to talk about it…".

In addition to the feeling of shame expressed in the previous testimony, there tend to be serious social consequences for women due to the stigma attached to sexual violence.

"You cannot remain silent over what they do, they did this [sexual violence] to me. They did worse things to other girls and we were all threatened. Anyone else in my situation would be afraid, sure that she would not speak out of fear, that she would not be able to bear the bad reputation she would have because of this, because everyone will say that you were raped and they did this or that to you…".

In many cases, this same stigma leads to women being blamed for what happened to them and can lead to social marginalization. This is one of the main impacts of sexual violence on women, since they are normally stigmatized more than men who have been abused.

Sexual violence against men aims to humiliate them and directly question their masculinity, and is also associated with a level of stigmatization that makes denouncing it difficult. Even so, we argue that men usually have a larger family and social support network in comparison to women who have suffered sexual violence, who still are implicitly held responsible for having broken the social, cultural and religious mandates set out for them in terms of preserving their chastity, their modesty and their individual and family honour.

In cases in which family ties and social status suffer, women can also find that their economic opportunities become limited. When this happens, another consequence for them tends to be economic and social impoverishment.

Finally, we cannot fail to set forth that some women decide to commit suicide "out of sheer desperation or depression after suffering violence" (Griese, 2012: 95). These deaths are not, however, counted as deaths directly or indirectly caused by violence.

Unfinished grieving

In Western Sahara grieving is ongoing and prolonged over time, converting it into chronic grief.

Women who have lost close family members through murder or enforced disappearance suffer deep psychological impact. In particular, women with disappeared family members are never able to reach closure due to the uncertainty over the whereabouts of their relatives and their continued suffering. Unanswered questions keep the traumatic situation alive on an individual and social level. In fact, enforced disappearance of persons is not only one of the most extreme expressions of violence against those who have been made to disappear, but also against their male and female relatives, since impunity ensures that the grief will be perpetual.

In these circumstances, any information relating to the appearance of human remains revives the latent wound. This happened to one of the women interviewed when in 2006 the corpse of a Sahrawi person was found:

> *"At that time I felt very affected because I thought it could be my mother… I thought she could be that person".*

In addition to prolonging grief, other elements that work as factors of chronic grief and also found in Western Sahara are "the suddenness and the massiveness of the losses, as well as the inability to perform proper funerary rites to say goodbye" (Worden [1991], quoted in Chía Chávez *et al.*, 2011: 191).

> *"It is too painful, I can't sleep… This situation will not stop until there is an autopsy of my murdered son and I can give him a decent burial"*[48].

Also, an added negative effect on processing grief is "the impossibility or limitation of expression grief when a person has the need to do so," specifying that "such problems are common in cases of collective violence, when it is dangerous to talk, the context and social support for it are limited, and forms of recognition and solidarity, such as funerals and memorial services are repressed" (Chía Chávez *et al.*, 2011: 192).

48 Tabkar Haddi, personal interview, 2016.

Together with the above, some of the emotions stated by the women point to difficulties in verbalizing the traumatic experience having to do not only with the danger involved, but also with the level of personal distress caused by the violence. When this is the case, emotional suffering ends up becoming somatized:

> *"I don't like to talk about it, because every time I do I can hardly breathe…".*

In one of the most extreme cases, one of the women who was arrested and made to disappear twice together with her mother expressed her great pain while recalling how her mother, during her second arrest was unable to bear the violence any more:

> "*I have the picture in my mind of seeing my mother die under the torture…".*

An experience such as this has lasting traumatic impact that is difficult to heal, especially when there is no relief, but rather a continuum of political violence.

Broken families

In all situations of political repression and extreme violence by the state, terror is used to break down not only people but their overall interpersonal and social relationships. The family lives of the women interviewed were therefore impacted in several ways.

First, the loss of family members (fathers and mothers, sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, partners, etc.) through murder or disappearance is the most painful and irreparable impact they face. As family members of victims, it may be pertinent to take into account gender difference in regard to how family impact is experienced: "Women may have been brought up to define themselves and their life projects in terms of their relationships –with their partner, their parents, their brothers and sisters, their children, nephews and nieces–; thus, their well-being is affected differently and more severely whether loss or harms comes to a specific member or affects the family in general terms" (Lyons, 2011: 165).

In cases in which women have been the direct victims, the family breakdown also affects their loved ones in a different way, including impacting their mental health.

> *"When they took her away in 1983, she had a year-and-a-half old daughter and stayed home. She had three sisters and a brother. Her brother lost his memory over what happened, fell into depression, and has been ill since then".*

Second, the Moroccan occupation and the deportation of a large segment of the Sahrawi population to the Tindouf camps was and continues to be a fundamental cause of families being split up, and affects practically all women. Despite 40 years having gone by since the occupation, there have been no changes in the political and military conditions that would favour the permanent reuniting of Sahrawi families dispersed between the occupied zone, the Tindouf camps and the Diaspora.

In some cases, when individual reunions were possible after many years of separation,[49] the women describe having difficulties while starting to recompose a family structure among individuals who hardly know each other after so long.

> *"Since I was four I grew up highly influenced by being an orphan, by the absence of my father, a Polisario militant. My grandparents' efforts were not sufficient to fill the void, although they bought me clothing for celebrations and they took care of me, but I didn't value that. My time at school was very hard, when I saw the other girls with their fathers. Everything bad that happens to me I always associate with the loss of my father and it hurt me not even to remember his face (…). Meanwhile, my yearning to see him again grew. In 1992 my grandmother died and in 1996, my grandfather died. I then got a passport to go to see my father, via Mauritania, to the camps. I was 40 years old. When I went to the camps, the first three days with my father were like being in a cloud, distracted. I couldn't concentrate on his face. On the fourth day I started feeling normal…".*

In other cases family members were forced to split up even while living in the same territory, due to harassment and pressure by Morocco:

49 For example, through the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' (UNHCR) Family visit program (ACNUR) that began in 2004.

"After they killed my son [Mohamed Lamin Haidala], my family's situation became more difficult. My family is ruined, my 17-year-old son doesn't want to even go out, my father, who lived in Laayoune, went out to the country, he couldn't look at the faces of the murderers who still live in front of his house, protected by the police".

Stolen motherhood

Among the consequences of violence present and manifested by several women are those relating to the experience of motherhood. Some were separated from their children when they were arrested, and depending on the case, went from periods of months to periods of several years without seeing them. Other women were arrested together with their sons or daughters, interrogated and beaten in front of them and then imprisoned. These experiences were recounted both by women who were mothers or daughters at the time of the arrests.

Along with separation from children, they also characterize their reencounter with them, when possible, as traumatic. For example, women who after having disappeared for several years were freed and returned to their homes, found themselves with children who were virtual strangers to them owing to the time that had elapsed:

"I have four children, who at the time of my imprisonment [1980] were left completely alone… After my release in June 1991, I found my mother very ill… I also did not recognize any of my daughters… After greeting them I asked: 'And whose children are these?' They told me they were my daughters… That can't be, they're all grown up…'. It took me a week or two to accept that they were my daughters. One had a scar and I recognized her by that scar…".

In the highly polarized context between the Sahrawi population and the Moroccan colonists, it was especially hard for one of the women, upon her release after several years of being disappeared, when she found out her daughter's new situation.

"When I got out of prison, my only daughter had married a Moroccan and had gone away. It was very painful for me, as a woman like me who had struggled and suffered… In recent years I have had some

contact with her and I now understand my daughter better. She was left alone very young, and she was always afraid at school...".

Violence against Sahrawi women has also had an impact on their decisions or possibilities regarding childbearing. For example, some women who had spent many years in prison stated that they were not able to have children because they had been deprived of their freedom during their most fertile years.

Lastly, although we have not been able to directly confirm this, based on the evidence of physical impact from other contexts, we know that sexual violence can cause injury to and even functional disability of the genital organs, which "can also result in reproductive alterations, such as complications of various types during pregnancy and childbirth, frequent miscarriages and also infertility (Griese, 2012: 95). Many women also have to deal with undesired pregnancy as a result of rape, and some of them put themselves at serious risk by submitting to unsafe abortions" (ibid.).

Effects on conjugal life

Violence impacts on women's emotional and sex lives in several ways. There is limited information on this topic, however, as few explicit references were made to this matter.

One of the statements that did emerge was that for some women the violence curtailed their shared plans for conjugal life, both for women whose partners were murdered or disappeared and for women who were abducted and later released. Among these women there was frequent concern during their captivity over the situation they would face upon their release, if they made it through their imprisonment alive:

"I disappeared for over four years. We were very concerned about our release because you don't know what is going to happen, what had happened to your family, if your husband is going to be there or if he married someone else...".

It is also the experience of some of the younger women that their option for political activism can be a factor delaying or even limiting their chances

to find a mate. This is a circumstance that we consider not so common among men activists.

In turn, the potential impact of sexual violence on this dimension of the life of women must be taken into account, even lacking any direct testimony on it. Research from different parts of the world shows that, on a physical level, "sexual alterations and dysfunction and pain during the sex act are highly probable" (Griese, 2012: 95).

In cases in which sexual violence also caused infertility in women, this can also increase their difficulty of finding or keeping a partner, particularly in cultural environments in which women's reproductive ability is a highly valued criteria for seeking a mate.

Lastly, at the psycho-social level, sexual violence may directly affect gender relations. In the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina, for example, a certain degree of "provisionality" in male-female relations was found to have developed, and was attributed to the fact that sexual violence against women had the effect of "alienating women from men. Not only were many women incapable of considering having sexual relations with men, but many women who had not directly suffered abuse were also alienated by a masculine culture that they perceived as the origin of such violence" (Cockburn, 1998).

Limits on educational opportunities

The women interviewed alluded repeatedly to lost educational opportunities as a result of the occupation and the violence. For the older ones, the family losses as a result of the war, the murders, the enforced disappearances, caused their family responsibilities to increase, preventing them from being able to continue their own educational development. As seen, among the youngest, some were directly expelled from public school without just cause and others were pressured to leave school as a way to avoid the harassment to which they were subject by their Moroccan teachers.

> *"I was smart, mainly in mathematics, but they wouldn't acknowledge it. The way they treated me caused a block and I stopped studying. Later on I had a daughter and I realized that due to the abuse I had*

lost a bit of concentration in my life. [At school] I suffered a lot of discrimination".

For the women that were abducted and made to disappear, going back to school to finish their studies has been practically impossible.

"At that moment I knew I couldn't go back to school [after being detained and made to disappear]. I wanted to become a member of society but I didn't have the means to attend private school"[50].

The Moroccan strategy of educationally excluding individuals who were not in favour of the regime hampers the short and long term personal development of women. Under such conditions, school becomes hostile territory for knowledge, free-thinking and free speech, and a clear deterrent for Sahrawi women.

Precarious living conditions

Educational discrimination and its consequences are directly related to lowered employment and socio-political participation possibilities for women and therefore, to more precarious material living conditions.

Sahrawi women in the occupied territories live under constant threat of being economically and/or occupationally penalized if they openly state their identity and political opinion. As we described, participation in the struggle by women who are beneficiaries of the National Protection Card is restricted, as they run the risk of being identified and losing their entitlement to the subsidy. For women who are employed, particularly in the public administration, the penalization ranges from having wages frozen to being dismissed.

This situation forces women to strike a difficult balance between their economic and employment situation and their political activism, and this has a strong psychological impact on them:

"We live in a situation of disorder, living parallel lives".

50 Testimony report in Martin Beristain, Gil and Guzmán (2013: 108).

Their scarce employment possibilities, along with the Moroccan means for penalizing the exercise of rights, have a direct impact on deteriorating women's living conditions and those of their families. This situation is even more traumatic in the case of those who are the sole support of their families.

Furthermore, when women are family members of persons who were murdered, disappeared or imprisoned, they also face economic difficulties, above all where there they were or are economically dependent on the direct victim.

4. Ways of confronting and resisting violence

The socio-political situation of Western Sahara has changed very little since the military occupation began, and therefore the psycho-social trauma present in the Sahrawi population and the impact on women described –at least in part– in the foregoing pages, can be qualified as chronic. "The trauma is not based on an acute, violent moment that took place, but rather on a historical-social context. The traumatic experience thereby becomes chronic and more deeply ingrained to the extent the social situation remains unchanged" (Minoletti, 2005: 69).

Lacking substantial social and political changes, and proper mental and physical healthcare for victims to facilitate their gradual recovery and their, the Sahrawi population has been dealing with the impact of violence practically alone and unaided for decades, and even more so in the occupied territories.

That said, it is important to keep several issues in mind. On the one hand, analysing the impact of human rights violations "does not involve viewing the traumatic experiences as a stigma or a feature that would negate the ability of victims to be able to recover and rebuild their lives" (Martin Beristain, 2009: 7); on the other, how a person responds to painful and traumatizing experiences varies depending on the person and his or her environment. According to Olga Paz Bailey (2012: 88), "it generally depends on childhood experiences and emotions, the support he or she has been given, the way he or she interprets the world and the resources used".

In the following, our centre of interest continues to be the experience of Sahrawi women in the occupied territories and, specifically, the ways they confront and resist violence.

Awareness of the collective harm and mutual support

Since 1975, political violence in Western Sahara has been so widespread and of such magnitude that women often express strong awareness of it as a collective impact.

"It's not an isolated case, similar things have happened to most Sahrawi families".

"My tragedy is no different than that of many Sahrawi families".

"It's only a sample of what goes on daily in Western Sahara".

Repeated statements like these show that inserting their experience with violence into a broader social and political context helps women see themselves as part of a collective injury and makes them better able to determine the significance of what has happened.

Mutual support was and continues to be another of the practices generated by women to support each other amidst the violence. As an example, during the flight through the desert and the aerial bombings, there were women who took care of children whose families had been killed or had disappeared (Red Crescent, 1976). Another significant example is that of women who nursed the babies of mothers who had been arrested. Also, imprisoned women would look for ways to support each other and hold up under the pressure. Under these circumstances they showed a high capacity for empathy with the trials of other women who had suffered reprisals.

"In prison we celebrated the Sahrawi national day, we studied and taught other women and men to read… We tried not to be sad, not to become depressed despite not seeing the sun, despite the torture, despite not being able to wash ourselves, despite the brutal treatment by the police in the prison"[51].

"I told them to do it to me, to see if they would stop torturing her...".

"They threatened me a lot not to tell anyone about this [sexual violence], but I decided to talk about it because I know that many Sahrawi women have suffered the same thing but couldn't talk about it. I'm not the only one this has happened to. There are many Sahrawi women who were too shy to talk about it. I decided to talk about it because what they did to me is not at all easy to deal with"[52].

51 El Ghalia Djimi, quoted in Macías Martín (2013).

52 Hayat Erguibi, public testimony on internet from Laayoune, 2009.

These attitudes and behaviours are part of the solidarity mechanisms practiced by women subject to the most extreme situations of violence.

Intergenerational alliance

One of the ways younger and older women have developed to deal with the situation is by the establishing a sort of intergenerational alliance based on mutual recognition of experiences and their commitment to resisting the occupation.

The youngest repeatedly express their admiration towards their mothers, aunts, sisters… for their defence of the Sahrawi cause, for having resisted in the face of grave situations of violence and having supported family members who suffered reprisals.

Beyond family ties, these younger women also express admiration for adult women who have developed a significant political career, either in the initial stages of the conflict or at present. The references already made to women such as Mbarka Boujmajrouta, Aminatou Haidar, El Ghalia Djimi o Zahra Bousaoula, are only a few examples of the leaders who are respected and followed by these younger women.

> *"In 2005, while preparing the March 8 demonstration I met Aminatou Haidar and El Ghalia Djimi. Since then I never miss the demonstrations… I found my calling and myself. March 8th and meeting those women was important for me".*

Sometimes younger women establish a ranking of the experiences of their elders and their own depending on the degree of repression and gravity of the human rights violations they faced. This is manifested as a certain reluctance to speak in the presence of their colleagues.

> *"My story is small in relation to what others have gone through…".*

Adult and senior women, aware of being role models and reference points for the younger women, assume the intergenerational responsibility of transmitting the legitimacy of their cause and the spirit of struggle to the younger generation so that it will not wane or be abandoned.

> *"The most important thing if we can't achieve Independence in our time, is for the next generations to take up the torch and carry on…*

The basis of the Sahrawi revolution is for it to continue from one generation to another until it is achieved. The most important thing is for the memory to remain so [the revolution] stays alive, so that other peoples who are unaware of all this totally overlooked, unknown history can come to know it".

Political identity and commitment

Despite the fact that generating physical and emotional suffering is one of the tools of the violence exercised by the Moroccan State, its impact has not been able to divert the political will and mobilization of women activists.

The impacts of repression are analysed by the women in their political dimension. From an early age they felt the need to examine themselves and question their reality as a way of trying to understand what was happening around them:

"I was 6 years old and would sing a song using a can as a drum. Sahara matulá – Sahara is not for sale. I didn't know what it said, I didn't understand it, but my mother always asked me to sing it to her because she loved it. And I would ask myself: Why do Moroccans live here if no one wants them here? Why does my mother like this song so much? Why are they arresting our neighbours? Why can't we speak about the cause?".

Since their youth they have been acquiring a full awareness of the *modus operandi* of the Moroccan security forces and to a certain extent, an understanding of the risks and the personal costs they face.

When she was arrested, one of the women decided to start a monologue with herself: *"I am in a struggle, I have to face up to it"*, while at the same time feeling fear and uncertainty thinking of her mother and her father and of how much they would suffer when they found out she had been arrested. Also, she stated that in view of the indiscriminate way the Moroccan police were arresting people she knew that sooner or later they were going to arrest her. Meanwhile, in her internal discussion with herself she would think: *"At least my arrest was for political reasons and not for something else".*

They have been able to manage their experience so as not to leave room for paralysation; on the contrary, they have shown great ability in transforming

their suffering into active demands with political and ethical content and in which they ultimately find comfort:

> *"After 1991 we were the women [released after several years as detainees-disappeared] who carried the flag of the struggle that had begun in the streets. We decided that we had to speak about what had happened to us, to our own flesh and blood, and also that we were obligated to look for the persons who had disappeared".*

> *"If it doesn't kill you the blow makes you stronger. We came out of that stronger and more determined. That is why I am a member of the Committee for the Right to Self-Determination".*

> *"I feel that I am doing my social duty and that makes me feel good…".*

For the women with family members who were killed or disappeared, political commitment was an instrument that gave them dignity; as such, for them the fight against impunity is in and of itself a way of confronting and resisting what happened.

> *"I dreamt of being the last mother of a martyr, but after my son there were more. (…) I walk strong to seek justice. (…) During the strike I was hungry the first three days, but after that I wasn't. My head was focused on my son's cause, on recovering his body and having justice be done. (…) I continue doing everything to have justice be done, and if I don't achieve anything I'll go back to the hunger strike, but this time no water or sugar".*

> *"My family, like most families of disappeared people, is demanding that they tell us where they are, or where their bodies are. We are fighting against impunity".*

As a group, women are the ones who have shown themselves to be highly resilient against political violence, even when they are burdened by very traumatic experiences they can't even talk about: *"What I have experienced is more than anyone can bear"; "What I went through and saw in prison is difficult for anyone to understand"; "It's difficult to say in words..."*. They were able to resituate their experiences, without letting the harm take over, so as to able to recover control over their own lives to the extent possible and reinforce their collective political identity.

> *"I cannot tell you all the suffering and humiliation we have gone through, but despite all the drama, no one is going to make me change until we have freedom or at least until we die along the way".*
>
> *"I have always defended human rights, in demonstrations. Despite the suffering no one can push us back in this fight for Independence".*
>
> *"I am very sure that this is the way, and I trust myself and agree with myself on that".*

Creation of a space for women

For the women interviewed, the constant tension and state of alert, police harassment, political, family and/or work responsibilities, physical pain, fear, anxiety… are all personal contextual factors that strongly affect them and prevent them from having the time they need to talk and share their experience.

In addition to needing time for themselves, they consider it strategic to have their own physical space in which to meet work on their own issues. Precisely for that reason they particularly highlight the creation of the Women's House (*Casa de las Mujeres*) in Laayoune as a collective historic achievement[53].

> *"This space is like being in a dream, because there are Women's Houses in the camps, but it didn't seem possible to be able to have one under the occupation… I still see it as a dream, because it is a great victory for us".*

The Women's House in the occupied territories, acts as a spatial and temporal context and an important tool for activating and recovering collective memory:

53 This has been the case in other contexts, such as in Guatemala, where women who survived war and political violence began working in their own spaces. In that regard, Olga Paz Bailey (2012: 91) states: "When the women and find themselves together in safe places they listen to each other and develop confidence in themselves and self-assurance and express the need to speak, denounce and be heard. They want to express their grief, their pain and their stories, the memory that is part of their identity and that they have had to keep secret. They want their stories to be known and for what they experienced not to be forgotten, as evidence that 'we suffered too'".

"Listening to the others made me remember many things too…".

During the work done for this study, the environment of trust created among women made it possible for testimonies to come forth, sometimes being voiced for the first time even though they had known each other, even known each other well, for many years. Although the collective memory process was not carried out in a deliberately therapeutic context, it turned out that for them "telling the story is like a sedative"[54] which they expressed in different ways:

> *"We heard experiences about ourselves that we had never heard before, it opened my eyes. At the meetings we always talk about work, but not about ourselves. I didn't know a lot of things about the ones who are here".*
>
> *"It's been so important to share and also to be able to laugh together, and set aside our suffering…".*
>
> *"Through everything we shared I found myself".*
>
> *"We took up this cause very sincerely right from the start and have forgotten about our own personal experience and its importance for future generations. It was always just the struggle, the struggle, but now we know the importance of our testimony."*

The participants in this process especially valued the opportunity to listen to each other and share experiences relating to their past and present history as determined by the Moroccan occupation. This contributes to their dealing with the violence and can be an instrument of individual and group empowerment for the following reasons: a) it reinforces the ties among them and helps strengthen their identity as women; b) it raises their awareness regarding the injustice suffered and their ability to express what they experienced; c) it helps them identify common patterns of violence against them, even though each experience is and must be treated as unique; d) it empowers women in their determination to engage in political participation, in the face of the weakening effect sought by the exercise of violence; and it increases their perception of their own strength, courage and strategic role, as well as the enormous sacrifices they have made.

54 Expression used by Argentine author Nora Strejilevich, a survivor of her country's military dictatorship.

Transnational solidarity and activism

Sahrawi women have opened lines of communication and solidarity with institutions and associations in other countries, both mixed organizations specialized in defending human rights and women's organizations and networks.

Regarding international solidarity among women, one highlight was the *Unión Nacional de Mujeres Saharauis* (National Union of Sahrawi Women, UNMS) joining the World March of Women (WMW), one of the most important events in the feminist movement that currently brings together groups and organization from all continents[55]. The relationship began in 2007 when the World March of Women was invited to participate in the V Congress of the National Union of Sahrawi Women in Tindouf. The goal was to get to know each other and plan common action between the UNMS and the WMW's National Coordinating Committees for the Maghreb and Sub-Saharan Africa.

At the 9th International Meeting of the World March of Women, held in Brazil on August 25-31, 2013, a discussion was held to establish International Solidarity with Sahrawi Women Day. After the discussion, the International Committee of the WMW ratified the proposal to celebrate February 18 every year as a day of solidarity and action in support of the struggle of the women of Western Sahara[56].

This international network has shown solidarity "with the women who fight every day to defend freedom and self-determination in the occupied

55 In its diagnosis of international reality, the World March of Women identifies patriarchy as the system of oppression of women, and capitalism as the system of exploitation of a large majority of women and men by a minority. "These two systems, patriarchy and capitalism, are mutually reinforcing and interlinked with racism, sexism, misogyny, xenophobia, homophobia, colonialism, imperialism, slavery and forced labour. Patriarchy and capitalism are the basis of the fundamentalism and radicalism that prevent women and men from being free. They generate poverty, exclusion, violate human rights, particularly those of women, and they endanger mankind and the earth. The goal of the World March of Women is to build an alternative based on the values of equality, freedom, solidarity, justice and peace (World March of Women, 2004: 1).

56 On February 18, 2016, a tribute was held for Chaiaa, a nurse who was killed during the bombing of the Um Dreiga camp in 1976. At the time she was working in a Red Crescent dispensary caring for the injured that fled precisely from attacks by the Moroccan air force.

territories, the refugee camps and from the Diaspora" and called for (WMW, 2016):

a) all nations to firmly take up the defence of the cause of the Sahrawi people and to recognize the right of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) to self-determination;

b) the urgent holding of the referendum on the future of the occupied territory of Western Sahara, in accordance with the United Nations agreements signed in 1991 (Resolution 690);

c) the Government of Morocco to release Sahrawi political prisoners, respect people's human rights, end the looting of Western Sahara natural resources, and to implement the Sahrawi people's right to self-determination, and;

d) the African Union to play an active proactive role alongside the United Nations to put an end to the occupation and the constant human rights violations.

5. Unfulfilled international commitments to protect and promote the human rights of women

as in other places in the world, in Western Sahara there is a lack of correlation between the magnitude of the human rights violations and the international response before that reality.

As established by the United Nations at the Conference on Human Rights in Vienna (1993) "Violations of the human rights of women in situations of armed conflict are violations of the fundamental principles of international human rights and humanitarian law." (Article 38), In this chapter we offer a critical analysis from a gender standpoint of some of the instruments of international law[57] that relate to the protection and promotion of the human rights of women specifically in contexts of war and political violence.

These are international commitments that are applicable to Western Sahara and that, nonetheless, as we have seen in the preceding pages, have been systematically unfulfilled for decades.

Obviously, Morocco is the party most responsible for human rights violations in Western Sahara; as its political authorities are the ones acting through State security forces (police, military and auxiliary paramilitary forces), and using them as instruments of repression. Also, as we have seen, violence has also been practised against the Sahrawi people by Moroccan colonists, through aggression ranging from insults and beatings to armed violence, including school and workplace discrimination and lack of medical care. Such incidents, as with violations committed by the State security forces, are neither investigated nor brought to trial.

In addition to Morocco, both Spain and France have different types of direct responsibilities for the conflict (historical political and, at least in the

57 We use the term "international instrument" generically as a broad category that includes binding international agreements as well as non-binding documents that have been issued by international bodies and relate to international law, such as: declarations issued by multilateral conferences of states, resolutions by international agencies; general comments by committees of independent experts and documents on specific matters drafted by international non-governmental organizations (CEPAL, 2013).

case of Spain, legal[58]), as does the United Nations, the source of practically all the instruments we will discuss below, in trying to relate them to the reality of women in Western Sahara.

Geneva Conventions (1949) and Additional Protocols (1977)

In the framework of International Humanitarian Law, the four Geneva Conventions and their two Additional Protocols are the main instruments for protecting civilians in armed conflicts. As a whole, the provisions relating to women have been found to be limited in scope due to the fact that, on the one hand, they conceive of women as basically mothers, particularly as women who are pregnant or nursing babies and, on the other, they do not determine sexual violence offences to be serious crimes (Gardam, 1998).

In relation to sexual violence, the Fourth Geneva Convention (art. 27.2) establishes that: "Women shall be especially protected against any attack on their honour, in particular against rape, enforced prostitution, or any form of indecent assault". This is precisely the article invoked by the Sahrawi Red Crescent in denouncing the 1976 sexual violence perpetrated by the Moroccan military against Sahrawi women.

From a gender perspective, an evident limitation in the Geneva Conventions to this reference is that the type of protection is expressed in terms of women's decency. Furthermore, the fact that they omit any judgement of those responsible for such violations as criminals of war, and that this crime is not one of the serious offences under the Conventions, are factors that historically have contributed to considering sexual violence as "a lower category within the strict hierarchy of war crimes" (Durham y O'Byrne, 2010: 5).

Later, the only change in the additional Protocols of 1977 is that they no longer include the term "honour" in what was interpreted to be "language updating" (ibid.) Nonetheless, women continued to be considered only insofar as they were "expecting" or "mothers with young children to take care of," and it does not broaden the codification of prohibitions of sexual violence, which was done starting in the 1990s, as will shall see below.

58 For example, Spain would have pending legal responsibilities for violence committed by the military during the colonial period in Western Sahara, for example, the Zemla massacre in 1970.

United Nations General Assembly Resolution 3519 on Women's Participation in the Strengthening of International Peace and Security (1975)

From a gender perspective, in the context of the times in which it was approved we consider that this resolution has several salient features. First, the text is based on and incorporates the Mexico Declaration on the Equality of Women and their Contribution to Development and Peace in that women should play an important role in strengthening international peace and security. It calls upon all governments and intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations, "in particular women's organizations and women's groups," to intensify their efforts to "eliminate completely and definitely all forms of colonialism, and to put an end to the policy and practice of *apartheid*, all forms of racism, racial discrimination, aggression, occupation and foreign domination". Second, the resolution "expresses its solidarity with and its assistance for women who contribute towards the struggle of the peoples for their national liberation".

This is a resolution that highlights women as active, strategic beings in decolonization and national liberation processes, and recognizes the linkage between such processes and achieving peace. As such, when it was approved in 1975, the resolution was an especially relevant instrument for supporting Sahrawi women in their struggle against occupation, and so it remains to this day, since decolonization of Western Sahara has not been completed and they continue their struggle for national liberation.

In 1982 the United Nations approved a similar resolution (3763), entitled *Declaration on the Participation of Women in Promoting International Peace and Co-operation*. While this text continues to generically emphasize the women's contribution to peace, its references to the participation of women in the fight against colonialism and foreign aggression and colonialism are toned down, starting with the title itself.

Furthermore, the importance given to the actions of women in this matter in the previous resolution is replaced by greater visibility of women as victims: "All appropriate measures shall be taken to render solidarity and support to those women who are victims of mass and flagrant violations of human rights, such as *apartheid*, racism, racial discrimination, colonialism, neo-colonialism, aggression, foreign occupation and domination and of all other violations of human rights" (art. 9).

In the occupied Western Sahara, none of these resolutions have had any effect on the consideration of women as either active participants against occupation or as victims of human rights violations.

Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (1993)

In 1993, the World Conference on Human Rights held in Vienna stated expressly for the first time that the human rights of women and girls are an inalienable, integral and indivisible part of universal human rights. While the situation of women in armed conflicts was not dealt with expressly, the Conference "expressed its dismay at massive violations of human rights especially in the form of genocide, 'ethnic cleansing' and systematic rape of women in war situations, creating mass exodus of refugees and displaced persons" and called for an immediate stop to such practices (art. 28).

A noteworthy result of the Vienna Conference is that the discussions that were held laid the groundwork for the United Nations to approve the *Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women* (Resolution 48/104, of December 20, 1993). It was the first international human rights instrument to deal exclusively with violence against women as a violation of their basic human rights.

This Declaration defines violence against women as "any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life". Furthermore, the Declaration recognized that some groups of women are particularly vulnerable to violence, including women in situations of armed conflict[59].

59 The other groups this Declaration mentions are: women belonging to minority groups, indigenous women, refugee women, migrant women, women living in rural or remote communities, destitute women, women in institutions or in detention, female children, women with disabilities, and elderly women.

Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995)

In the second half of the 1990s there started to be heightened international recognition in regard gender analysis needing to be integrated in the planning, implementation and evaluation of policies and actions in situations of armed conflict. In particular, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action that came out of the Fourth World Conference on Women, in 1995, was a major boost for gender to begin to be taken into account as part of the international peace and security agenda and policy.

For the first time, a discussion was held during this Conference on women and armed conflict (paras. 131-149). As a result, the Beijing Platform for Action included very relevant specific objectives and actions for governments from a standpoint of women's rights in the context of armed conflicts, such as:

1. Increase the participation of women in conflict resolution at decision-making levels and protect women living in situations of armed and other conflicts or under foreign occupation.

2. Reduce excessive military expenditures and control the availability of armaments.

3. Promote non-violent forms of conflict resolution and reduce the incidence of human rights abuse in conflict situations.

4. Promote women's contribution to fostering a culture of peace.

5. Provide protection, assistance and training to refugee women, other displaced women in need of international protection and internally displaced women.

6. Provide assistance to the women of the colonies and non-self-governing territories.

From the point of view of Sahrawi women's rights, the fact that the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action reinstated the reference to women and armed conflict is key, as is establishes the direct linkage between military spending and availability of weapons and the violation of women's human rights.

Windhoek Declaration and Namibia Action Plan (2000)

In May 2000, the UN Department for Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) held a meeting in Windhoek, Namibia, to deal with the transversalization of the gender perspective in Multi-Dimensional Peacekeeping Operations.

Out of that meeting came the Windhoek Declaration, which states that in order to ensure effective peace support operations, principles of gender equality must permeate the entire mission. The Declaration adds that it is necessary to ensure participation by women and men as equal partners and beneficiaries in all aspects of the peace process. Based on this Declaration, the United Nations drafted the Namibia Action Plan on Mainstreaming a Gender Perspective in Multidimensional Peace Support Operations.

Based on the Windhoek Declaration and Namibia Action Plan, in 2001 Special Rapporteur on Violence against women Radhika Coomaraswamy, in her report *Violence against women perpetrated and/or condoned by the State during times of armed conflict (1997-2000)*, recommended that the United Nations adopt immediate measures to ensure increased representation by women in all UN institutions and all levels of decision-making, including as military observers, police, peacekeepers, human rights and humanitarian personnel in United Nations field-based operations, and as special representatives and envoys of the Secretary-General.

Despite this type of recommendations, there is a great imbalance in the numbers of men and women who make up United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) civilian and military personnel. The Mission refers to the need to increase the "gender balance" in military personnel as "imperative" in the "traditional environment" of Western Sahara, stating that "the presence of female UN Police is very welcomed by the local Sahrawi population during the patrols and family visits". Nonetheless, it is not at all a priority in view of the fact that the mission contingent is gradually shrinking in size.

UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (2000) and Additional Resolutions

After the Beijing Conference, the approval of this Resolution was another milestone marking a turning point in international interest in gender, conflicts and peace. It is especially noteworthy due to the fact that it was

adopted by the United Nations Security Council, the body with the highest decision-making power and, at the same time, the one which has historically been less prone to consider violence against women as a problem affecting international peace and security.

Resolution 1325 recognised that women and men experience conflicts differently by reason of gender. It called for the protection of women against all forms of violence against them and urged that their participation be ensured in negotiation processes and in all peace agreement implementation mechanisms.

Nonetheless, since its approval, Resolution 1325 has been only marginally implemented. In fact, as a instrument it has only limited practical applicability because it does not propose any specific action to prevent violence against women in conflicts or to ensure their participation in peace processes[60]. Another problem is that Resolution 1325 is not binding on governments; instead it is up to governments to draft National Action Plans as implementation tools, and they have total autonomy to define their objectives, measures and ways to follow-up and evaluate such plans, in addition to not being obligated to submit reports to the United Nations on their degree of compliance[61].

Attempts were made to correct this lack of specificity and implementation in late 2000s through successive approval by the Security Council of a total of seven additional resolutions on women, peace and security: 1820 (2008); 1888 (2009), 1889 (2009), 1960 (2010), 2106 (2013), 2122 (2013) y 2242 (2015). In general, common to all of them is that, in addition to reiterating the call for increasing women's participation in conflict prevention and resolution and in peacekeeping operations, they place strong emphasis on sexual violence during conflict. The centrality given to this issue has led some people to warn of the risk of converting sexual victimization into "the ultimate destiny of women in wartime" (Zarkov, 2006). This means that, while preventing this crime is necessary, solely focusing attention on sexual violence limits consideration of other violations of the human rights of women and their impact (political, economic, social and cultural), of the type we showed in this work.

60 In comparison, international protection of the child in situations of armed conflict has developed more extensively and has been more concrete in terms of measures to be adopted by governments and accountability instruments. An example of this is the 2005 United Nations Security Council Resolution 1612 on Children and Armed Conflict.

61 In 2016, sixty countries have an Action Plan to implement Resolution 1325, and neither Morocco nor the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic are among them.

In Western Sahara, MINURSO institutional information includes a generic reference to Resolution to 1325 and to the role played by women in the areas of peace, security and development. The mission adds that the United Nations Security Council must ensure that all country reports and renewals of mandates for UN Missions increase the protection and promotion of human rights for women, pursuant to Resolution 1325 and subsequent resolutions.

However, MINURSO has no programs nor undertakes any actions in this regard. Furthermore, the Mission itself acknowledges that from 1991 to date no United Nations Resolution or report by the Secretary-General has referred to the role of or any participation by women in promoting peace and security in the political process of Western Sahara."[62] Therefore, 25 years after its inception, MINURSO has not generated any type of information on the protection of Sahrawi women's human rights in the occupied territories, nor has it done so regarding their participation in promoting peace.

This absence is in contrast with what we show in this report, regarding Sahrawi women's high rate of participation in the peaceful resistance movement to put an end to the occupation and in defence of human rights, which is work directly related to building international peace and security.

In reality, the women interviewed have a clear awareness of the responsibility of the United Nations in continued human rights violations in Western Sahara. For years they have been demanding a substantive change be made in the MINURSO mandate to include observation of human rights[63]. Additionally, they record and denounce the numerous situations in which MINURSO personnel directly witness Moroccan police violence against peaceful demonstrations and protests by the Sahrawi, with no reaction on their part and the fact that women's rights do not merit any mention in their annual reports.

62 See the MINURSO website: <www.un.org/es/peacekeeping/missions/minurso>.

63 France, a permanent Security Council member, has systematically vetoed the broadening of the MINURSO mandate to include guaranteeing observance of human rights. Just as does Spain, France has geostrategic and economic interests in the region that ally it with the Moroccan State. France has manifested its support for women, peace and security on the Security Council and in 2010 issued an Action Plan to implement Resolution 1325. We have not, however, found any position adopted by France on this matter in which there is any allusion to the situation of women in Western Sahara. During its Security Council presidency in December 2013, France's priorities were the situations in Syria and Central African Republic, protection of civilians including journalists, and drug trafficking as a threat to peace and security.

Lastly, we consider it relevant that on page 22 of the Secretary-General's Report of April 1, 2011 on the situation concerning Western Sahara, several instances of "misconduct" are reported, including one accusation of sexual abuse and exploitation, still under investigation: "During the reporting period, eight cases of misconduct were reported, including one accusation of sexual abuse and exploitation. The majority of cases have been investigated and closed by the Mission, leaving one accusation from 2010 under investigation".

It is striking that this issue is dealt with in just five lines of text and under the heading "Conduct and discipline issues". The information given is very limited and opaque. The document offers no further information nor does it offer any allusion to this accusation in its final section, "Observations and recommendations." Furthermore, in later reports there is no reference even regarding the results of any investigation of the accusation of sexual abuse and exploitation. The total lack of transparency, as well as the fact that this type of accusation is dealt with internally with no participation by any independent investigative body, are factors that act in favour of impunity for the potential offences committed by United Nations forces stationed in Western Sahara.

Concern over violence against women perpetrated by United Nations Peacekeeping forces was already expressed in 2001 by the Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women Radhika Coomaraswamy, in her mentioned *Report on Violence against women perpetrated and/or condoned by the State during times of armed conflict (1997-2000)*: "Women may also be exposed to violence by the international authorities or forces assigned to protect them. There has been a growing number of reports of rape and other sexual abuse committed by United Nations peacekeeping forces and staff" (para. 58). It also warns that "military contractors linked to peacekeeping forces and United Nations Police typically increase the demand for prostitution and may even participate in the trafficking of women into forced prostitution" (para. 59).

As stated, it is extremely difficult to gain a more exhaustive knowledge regarding acts of violence against women by members of the United Nations personnel, in this case the MINURSO, since no information is provided on this matter. It is, nonetheless, a serious problem that requires international attention and independent investigation, for it also to be possible to prosecute United Nations personnel for women's human rights violations.

Maputo Protocol of the African Union (2003)

We include the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, known also as the Maputo Protocol, or Protocol on Women in Africa, alongside regional international law instruments. This Protocol was adopted by the Assembly of the African Union (AU) on 11 July 2003 and entered into force on 25 November 2005 and to date has been ratified by 49 of the 53 AU member states. It is legally binding on the States Parties and considered "unprecedented on African women's rights".

The text of the Maputo Protocol covers problems that are particularly relevant for African Women, such as HIV-AIDS, human trafficking, inheritance by widows, usurpation of property, abortion in cases of rape, incest or danger to the life of the mother, female genital mutilation, and exploitation and abuse against women in advertising and pornography (D'Almeida, 2011).

The Protocol also includes an article on the right to peace, establishing the right of African women to a peaceful existence and to participate in the promotion and maintenance of peace. In this regard, the States Parties commit to taking measures to increase the participation of women at all levels in: programmes of education for peace and a culture of peace; in the structures and processes for conflict prevention, management and resolution; in decision making structures to ensure physical, psychological, social and legal protection of asylum seekers, refugees, returnees and displaced persons, in particular women, as well as in the management of camps and settlements for such persons; and in planning, formulation and implementation of post-conflict reconstruction and rehabilitation (art. 10).

The Protocol also refers to protection of women in armed conflicts (art. 11). Here, the States Parties undertake to respect for the rules of international humanitarian law, which involves ensuring the protection of the civilian population, particularly including women. It also adds that asylum seekers, refugees, returnees and displaced persons are to be protected against all forms of violence, rape and other forms of sexual exploitation, that such acts are to be considered war crimes, genocide and/or crimes against humanity and that their perpetrators are to be brought to justice before a competent criminal jurisdiction.

Since Morocco renounced joining the African Union –because it recognized the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) as a member– to date it has not signed or ratified the Maputo Protocol.

6. Towards an agenda of truth, justice and reparation with a gender perspective in Western Sahara

In view of all that is set forth in this work in regard to violence against women in the occupied territories of Western Sahara, we consider it necessary to advance towards an agenda in defence of human rights, including the right to truth, justice and reparation, that avoids any inequality or discrimination against them. The following pages seek to contribute to that end.

The right to truth

To this date there has been no Truth Commission or any other similar official mechanism set up to rigorously and exhaustively investigate the crimes committed against the Sahrawi people throughout the whole time period (1975-present) with at least a minimal level of respect for and dignification of the victims.

Neither has any official investigation dealt in a serious and expert way with the human rights violations committed by the Moroccan State against Sahrawi women. As we have seen, they were direct victims of serious forms of violence; many were subjected to the worst suffering in Moroccan secret detention centres and jails, where they suffered physical, psychological and sexual torture. They were detained extra-judicially, and a number of them were made to disappear for years.

In 2004 Morocco created the Equity and Reconciliation Commission (IER), presenting it as the "first Transitional Justice mechanism in North Africa and the Middle East" (García-Luengos, 2005). Its mandate consisted of investigating human rights violations committed in the country since 1956, the year it became independent, to 1999, the year of King Hassan II's death. In its report published in 2006, the IER stated that it had examined 742 cases of the 22,000 case files in its archives, focusing on systematic and/or massive human rights violations (IER, 2005).

According to Sahrawi victims' and human rights associations, while the IER initially fostered some hope (also among Moroccan human rights organizations), its limitations soon became evident. Sahrawi organizations made known their disagreement with the methods used by the IER, accusing it of altering the truth to reinforce impunity (AFAPREDESA, 2005). One of

the main factors that delegitimise the IER and its results is that it abstains from investigating State- condoned violence after 1999[64].

In regard to women, the IER Report states that it carried out "a field investigation on gender with a limited number of women who were victims of gross human rights violations" (IER, 2005: 21). The report recognizes that in the period analysed, women, just like men, "were victims of different forms of violations, such as arbitrary detention, enforced disappearance, exile and death during kidnapping and urban disturbances". It also refers to "special forms of humiliation and repression" that caused women greater suffering, such as: lack of basic conditions of hygiene during detentions (causing psychological suffering particularly during menstruation); lack of medical care in cases of childbirth and miscarriage; being forced to disrobe in front of their torturers; being threatened with rape and actually raped (ibid.: 69-70). Nonetheless, none of these references are contextualized nor are they related directly to violations of the human rights of Sahrawi women.

Human rights associations such as the Collective of Sahrawi Human Rights Defenders (CODESA), led by Aminatou Haidar, have exhaustively reviewed and verified the information contained in both the IER and the 2010 report of the monitoring committee on the implementation of the IER recommendations, finding gaps in information and vague language. This work included systemizing data relating to Sahrawi women whose deaths were alleged by the Moroccan State to have taken place during detention at military headquarters in Western Sahara and Morocco, limiting the total figure to eleven.

64 In an equally critical sense, reports on human rights in Western Sahara, such as The Oasis of Memory (*El oasis de la memoria*, 2012, Vol. II: 284-285) point out that the IER Report does not meet basic standards for finding out the truth regarding what happened and situations of victims, whether Sahrawi or a large part of the Moroccan victims, no summary of cases investigated is included, nor is there any list of cases with the basic circumstances involved or the responsible institutions, or any in-depth investigation of emblematic cases showing how repression was carried out on the civilian population.

Nombre completo	Date & Place of Birth or Age	Date & Place of Abduction	Responsible Party	Detention Centres	Date & Place of Death	Cause of Death
Fatma Naser	1949 Place: **unspecified**	September 1975 in Oum Saiih near Tantán	Members of Moroccan military	Military headquarters at Lamsid, near Tantán	1976 Military HQ	Difficult conditions
Ambarka Daf Sidi Salek	1923, in Smara	July 1976, in Smara	Moroccan military	Military HQ in Smara	Date: **unspecified** Place: Smara	**Unspecified**
Fatma Boya Aahmar	1944, in Sakia El Hamra	Early 1976, in Smara	Moroccan military	Military HQ in Smara	Date: **unspecified.** Place: Military HQ in Smara	**Unspecified**
Khaira Etalbi	1953, in Laayoune	15 June 1976, in Laayoune	**Unspecified**	**Unspecified**	**Unspecified**	**Unspecified**
Lakbira Mohamed Lamin Elhousin	**Unspecified**	February 1978, in Izik, south of Laayoune	Moroccan military	**Unspecified**	**Unspecified**	**Unspecified**
Amgaibila Mohammed Salem	**Unspecified**	1979, in Tantán	Moroccan military	**Unspecified**	**Unspecified**	**Unspecified**
Salka Bachri Bay	1940, in Sakia El Hamra	1 May 1980 at home in Marrakesh	Police officers	**Unspecified**	**Unspecified**	**Unspecified**
Khnatha Ayad	1942, in Laayoune	June 1983 while pregnant Place: **unspecified**	**Unspecified**	Rapid Intervention HQ in Laayoune	Date: one week after abduction Place: **unspecified**	**Unspecified**
Adjimi Fatmato Ahmed Salem Aba Haad	1927, in Sakia El Hamra	4 April 1984 in Agadir	Police officers	Rapid Intervention HQ in Laayoune	Date: **unspecified** Place: Rapid Intervention HQ in Laayoune	**Unspecified**
Ghili Elbourhimi	1951 Place: **unspecified**	22 February 1985 Place: **unspecified**	Police officers	Rapid Intervention HQ in Laayoune	Date: **unspecified** Place: Rapid Intervention HQ in Laayoune	Harsh conditions
Fatma Lahmadi Cheikh Ahmad	**Unspecified**	22 June 1993 in Miran with sister Maryam Lahmadi Cheikh Ahmad	**Unspecified**	Smara security perimeter Smara	**Unspecified**	**Unspecified**

Source: CODESA (2013: 13 y 14)[65].

65 We highlight in bold letters what in the original table CODESA showed in red calling attention to the amount of information concealed that was relevant to the facts. As shown, in no case was data given on cause of death, except for euphemistic references to "difficult conditions" or "harsh conditions," which are especially painful and re-victimizing for victims and their families.

This table is an example of the effort that has been done by human rights organizations to classify and demonstrate Morocco's omissions relating to the basic facts of the case and responsible institutions. CODESA adds that the fate of the eleven women referred to in the IER monitoring committee report is still unknown, just as is that of other abducted Sahrawi women whose cases were not dealt with by the report.

In addition to the challenges of the investigation of political violence against Sahrawi women over the past four decades, the force of social stereotyping regarding women as only family members of direct victims may also have been a factor in the persistent information gaps.

As a result, on the one hand, there is the significant under-recording and lack of documentation of crimes against women. On the other, there is the strengthening of the narrative the ends up blotting out women as political subjects in their own right. The testimony we have gathered from women for this report shows purposeful, first-person activism on their part, contradicting the stereotyped view of women solely as "family members": mothers, wives, daughters and, in general, family members of political activists.

At the same time, we cannot overlook that being a family member of a victim has led to stigmatization for many women and, therefore, to greater exposure to violence. This has been the case in the numerous occasions in which the Moroccan authorities have punished women by detaining them, torturing them and imprisoning them because of their family relations, or while demanding information on the whereabouts of their family members.

The right to justice

Sahrawi human rights associations have repeatedly demanded that Morocco end human rights violations in Western Sahara and that the actual perpetrators and instigators be tried, but the Moroccan State has not taken any steps to date in either of these two directions.

First of all, on the basis of this study, we consider it that ensuring equal access to justice for Sahrawi women for the crimes perpetrated against them needs to be recognized as a goal of that demand. Besides, this does not mean that the recognition of their status as victims of political violence in Western Sahara should derive in their treatment from a stigmatizing perspective.

For example, in relation to sexual violence, although much investigation still remains to be done, legal instruments currently exist in the framework of international law there which could channel women's demands of justice as is being done in other countries.

In the 1990s, sexual violence was included as a war crime and a crime against humanity for the first time in the statutes of the *ad hoc* international United Nations tribunals set up to try crimes committed during the war in the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and during the genocide in Rwanda (ICTR). These two tribunals issued the first convictions for sexual crimes; for example, in the case known as *Furundzija*, rape was considered a war crime, and in the *Akayesu* case, rape and other sexual violence was considered to be genocide owing to the ethnicity and the gender of the victims.

Since then, sexual violence against women during armed conflict started being described as a weapon or strategy of war pursuing military objectives such as: affecting the largest possible number of victims, spreading terror throughout the population and breaking down the social and community fabric of the enemy. It is also a type of violence that is associated with women's identity as "reproducers of society"; namely, that since women are also ethnic and national beings and have the ability to reproduce the next generation of a group, they are especially at risk as members of a specific group subject to violence (Mostov, 1995). This explains, for example, sexual violence being exercised as part of genocide and "ethnic cleansing" policies during different armed conflicts.

In 1998, the International Criminal Court (ICC) also included sexual violence in its statute, stating that rape, sexual slavery, enforced prostitution, forced pregnancy, enforced sterilization or any other form of sexual violence,[66] constitute crimes against humanity when committed as part of a generalized or systematic attack against the civilian population and in the knowledge of such attack. Also, the Court established that these same acts constitute a grave breach of the Geneva Conventions insofar as they are a grave breach of applicable law and custom applicable to international armed conflicts within the established framework of international law and, therefore, must be considered war crimes, particularly when committed as part of a plan or policy, or as part of large-scale commission of such crimes.

66 It is relevant that the International Criminal Court contemplates actions amounting to sexual violence in a broad way, while narrow, limited considerations solely linked to rape are what is customarily offered.

Keeping in mind the international legal framework in force, in Western Sahara the challenge is not only to investigate the facts, but also to demonstrate that since the occupation sexual violence has been a part of a large scale planned, systematic strategy of repression by the Moroccan State against Sahrawi women.

The right to reparation

In relation to the right of Sahrawi women to reparation of the harm suffered, any measure in this regard must be based on the causes and impact of the violence as a function of gender. This demand has been made repeatedly by the international women's movement and was recently included in the Report by the Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, of 5 January 2016 (para. 66): "Reparations must be premised on a full understanding of the gendered nature and consequences of the harm suffered and take existing gender inequalities into account to ensure that they are not themselves discriminatory."

In other words, no reparation measure can be presupposed to be gender neutral and expected to be able to compensate or benefit affected women and men affected by violence in the same way, because the lives of one and the other, and their experiences throughout the conflict, are determined by political, social and economic inequalities. As set forth in the Nairobi Declaration on Women's and Girls' Right to a Remedy and Reparation[67] (AA.VV, 2007: 5), these "must drive the transformation of socio-cultural injustices, and political and structural inequalities that shape the lives of women and girls".

As an example, an important challenge in this regard, although not the only one, arises in relation to sexual offences against women. As we have seen, in general this serious human rights violation is dealt with marginally, as part of the impact of the most traumatizing violence and which people find it most difficult to talk about. A frequent explanation in the Sahrawi case refers to the culture itself, including religion, as the origin of the social stigma suffered by women survivors of sexual violence and, explaining the

67 This Declaration was the result of an international meeting held in Nairobi, Kenya, in March 2007, of women from human rights organizations, women's organizations and organizations of survivors of sexual violence in situations of conflict from all continents.

difficulty involved in getting complaints filed. However, this circumstance is not exclusive to the Sahrawi and Muslim culture. To a greater or lesser extent, the social sanction and censure of women is part of the impact of this crime.

From a gender perspective, it would be necessary to adopt a broad, complex-based approach to reparation in these cases, based on the fact that reparation for women also includes positive actions towards transforming the factors of social inequality that affect: their greater exposure to the risk of sexual violence, and second, their greater re-victimization through the shame, guilt-placing and even social isolation that ensues.

This is a challenge in promoting family and community processes to provide support, protection and social recognition to women survivors. In fact, in addition to their political convictions, being able to count on having the support of their family and their closest social network is what has made it possible for some Sahrawi women to have had the courage to speak out and openly denounce sexual violence against them.

Collective effort is needed so that the sole responsibility for this violence is at all times the perpetrators' and never the women's. This can alleviate the feelings of guilt and shame often felt by women and contribute to dignifying them as victims who have a right to justice and reparation.

To that respect, we add that Sahrawi women have not had any opportunity to deal with their experience as victims of violence within any minimal psycho-social processes as are required under this type of situation. Their political resistance and activism does not generally or automatically replace the need to process the trauma undergone through physical and psychological loss and suffering. Therefore, even taking into account that the conflict in Western Sahara is ongoing and that repression continues, it is necessary to offer areas for activating the psycho-social support necessary to aid in processing the impact of this violence, both as direct victims and as relatives of persons killed, disappeared and imprisoned.

In other countries where women who have survived grave human rights violations have participated in spaces of this type, work has principally been done through mutual support groups focusing on the idea of persona, social and political empowerment. These processes are based on the fact that repression and war have an impact on all facets of a person, including community and social life, making the collective perspective of

recovery especially relevant.[68] Engagement with these women is done with a respectful, non-victimizing approach, so as to be able to deal with a broad variety of topics from their experience, such as those, which we have partially included in these pages.

The assessments made by the Sahrawi women interviewed were significant and revealing, stating that in their organizational work they always talk about work and never about themselves. Some women expressed the need to maintain a balance between the two, so as to preserve their mental health, their relationships and their mutual support. This serves to strengthen them against the occupation and its impact, and strengthens their identities as women in their daily contexts of lives and struggle.

Lastly, on the basis of what is set forth in this study regarding violations of social, economic and cultural rights, a reparation agenda from a gender perspective in Western Sahara should contemplate restitution of the educational and employment opportunities that were and are denied women on account of the violence, in the past and the present.

Women have been particularly affected by the Moroccan State's discriminatory educational and employment policies. Many women were forced to leave school and have lower employment rates and higher precarious employment rates, and have suffered serious violations of their social and economic rights. All this has an impact on their educational and employment aspirations and, therefore, on their personal development and economic security.

Some are trying to resume their education outside the formal Moroccan educational system (through private classes, language-learning, etc.), but they are doing so on their own, with great personal effort. Others are prevented from doing so by burdensome family responsibilities. Education is a strategic interest for them that needs to be supported and included in any reparation agenda.

68 An example is several feminist groups in Guatemala that have developed psycho-social engagement processes with indigenous women who are survivors of sexual violence perpetrated by the military during the their country's war. These organizations considered promoting empowerment from an integrated perspective to be key; in addition to psycho-social engagement, they promoted training on women's human rights, recovering of historic memory, social sensitization and political action on justice and reparation, and encounters among women survivors. For more information, see ECAP and UNAMG (2009).

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